OUR VIEW

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UPS: Is good psychology also sound economics?

The Unified Pension Scheme is a nod to people's behavioural preference for assured money over uncertain sums, but to minimize its fiscal cost, we'll need a steady rise in asset values

The government's unveiling of its Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) looks set to relegate the National Pension System (NPS) to history. Truth be told, this market-linked scheme launched in 2004 didn't get enough time to prove its ability to offer retirees a respectable payout. Two decades of investments in market instruments failed to impress people, apparently, even though it was faring alright in spite of contributions being made only bit-by-bit to its kitty. If contributors were pining for a re-adoption of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), which offered assured benefits, an explanation may lie in human behaviour. Prospect Theory, as laid out by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, posits that people generally prefer an assured sum of money over a potentially larger sum that's uncertain. This is so even if the laws of probability dictate that the expected value of the unsure option is higher. The duo's psychology experiments showed that people tend to be risk-averse in their approach to potential gains.

This behavioural insight may explain people's anxiety over the NPS despite seeing their contribution pool swell in line with India's stock market. That corpus, however, exists on paper and may shrink by the time they retire if the country's equity upsurge fizzles out. We have seen significant asset-price inflation in recent years, after all, and unlike the cost of living, stocks can undergo long phases of deflation. So, now that the UPS is offering an assured pension of half one's basic average salary over 12 months till retirement if one puts in 25 years of service (with smaller proportions for fewer years), and that too with other sweeteners thrown in, we can expect most employees to grab the new option with both hands. The big question, then, is whether the UPS is fiscally sustainable. The OPS, remember, was unsound because it had no funding device. Thankfully, the UPS is a clever hybrid. While it offers OPS-like assured payouts, what it shares with the NPS is its preset contribution characteristic. Would-be UPS pensioners must keep putting in 10% of their basic pay while they earn, as with the NPS, while the government will chip in 18.5%, a bit more than the NPS's 14%. The Centre has estimated an extra ₹6,250 crore needed in the next budget for this hike, plus a one-time ₹800 crore outlay to switch NPS users to this scheme.

What cannot be reliably forecast, however, is the fiscal burden in the decades ahead if UPS investments fail to generate sufficient funds for promised payouts. Overall, while the hybrid scheme will satisfy a psychological need and thereby shield the government from political accusations of being stingy, any shortfalls that need to be filled would call for future budget allocations. To keep such gaps small and the risk of draining India's exchequer low, the market value of UPS-invested assets will need to follow a steady upward path. In other words, the state now has a greater interest in ensuring an orderly rise in long-term asset values, given how costly a prolonged market slump could prove. As retail investors have stormed into the stock market, too much money chasing too few stocks has led equity valuations to outpace company earnings, by and large. The instability that such froth might spell could conceivably become a big public concern. Tighter corporate governance and market oversight, thus, would seem appropriate. Only if asset markets resist bubbles will the UPS succeed over the long haul—both fiscally and politically.

THEIR VIEW

India's law on digital protection places the 'little citizen' upfront

It lays the ground for a level playing field in India's digital economy while protecting user interests

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The recent landmark ruling by the US District Court for Columbia calling out Google's monopoly in online search has reignited global discussion on the dominance of Systematically Significant Digital Enterprises (SSDEs) such as Google, Meta and Amazon. In India, this has significant implications for the debate on the draft digital competition law, which aims to promote user freedom, competition, innovation and consumer empowerment by allowing the use of third-party apps on Core Digital Services.

Big Tech's dominance in the global digital marketplace, particularly through its app store policies, has faced scrutiny and regulatory challenges. The Competition Commission of India (CCI) imposed two penalties of ₹1,338 crore and ₹936 crore on Google for abuse of its dominant position in the Android mobile devices ecosystem and its play store and in-app payments, respectively. These penalties reflect growing concerns about Big Tech's market power and its impact on competition and consumer choice.

The draft digital competition law sets specific criteria for determining which enterprises qualify as SSDEs. These include user thresholds (core digital service provided by the enterprise has at least 1 crore end-users or at least 10,000 business users) and financial thresholds (turnover in India of not less than ₹4,000 crore, or global turnover of not less than $30 billion). By focusing regulatory scrutiny on Big Tech meeting these thresholds, the draft law effectively targets entities that wield substantial influence in the digital ecosystem, but without unduly burdening smaller players. This targeted approach enhances the effectiveness and fairness of the regulatory framework.

At the heart of the draft digital competition law's recommendations lies the principle of ensuring user choice and promoting a level-playing field. Currently, Big Tech often dictates which apps users can access on their platforms. This stifles competition and limits consumer choice. Users are confined to a narrow selection of apps and services pre-approved by technology platforms. This creates market conditions for duopolies, with dominant players deciding the rules. By mandating the freedom for users to integrate third-party apps into Core Digital Services, the draft law seeks to break this cycle.

This integration also fosters innovation and entrepreneurship within the digital marketplace. By opening up Big Tech platforms to external developers, the draft law creates opportunities for smaller app developers and startups to compete on a more level-playing field. This drives innovation as developers strive to create compelling apps that attract user attention and loyalty.

Moreover, allowing third-party apps on Core Digital Services enhances interoperability and data portability. Interoperability enables seamless interaction between different apps and platforms, facilitating smoother user experiences and healthy competition. Data portability, on the other hand, empowers users to switch between services easily while retaining their data, thereby reducing lock-in effects and enhancing consumer choice.

Big Tech corporations may argue that mandating the integration of third-party apps could compromise security and user experience. However, the Parliament of India has taken steps to address this concern. The passage of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act and the deployment of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) as a foundational tech layer demonstrate the government's commitment to safeguarding user data and promoting a secure digital environment.

The architectural principles of DPI prioritise interoperability, data portability and user control over personal data. These align closely with the goals of the draft digital competition law. By anchoring these principles in the legislative vision of the DPDP Act, the draft digital competition law seeks to establish a comprehensive framework that not only promotes competition but also protects user privacy and security.

The DPDP Act provides robust mechanisms for enforcing data protection standards, especially data empowerment and protection architecture (DEPA), consent management systems, and penalties to hold companies accountable for any breaches of user privacy. By integrating these provisions into the regulatory framework governing Big Tech, the draft digital competition law ensures that user data remains protected, regardless of which apps are integrated into Core Digital Services.

In essence, while Big Tech may raise concerns about the risks associated with third-party app integration, India's government has already laid the groundwork to address these concerns through comprehensive data protection legislation and deployment of DPI. By building on these foundations, the draft digital competition law aims to strike a balance between promoting competition and safeguarding user interests.

As India navigates the complexities of regulating Big Tech, ensuring user choice remains paramount in shaping a fair and equitable digital marketplace. For New Delhi, that represents the Little Citizen's view, even if it is not the Mountain View.

10 YEARS AGO

mint
Apex court order may alter coal import dynamics

JUST A THOUGHT

It's not how much money you make, but how much money you keep, how hard it works for you, and how many generations you keep it for.

ROBERT KIYOSAKI

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Our reform agenda must raise the quality of outcomes

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN

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Even as the Narendra Modi 3.0 government begins its term, there has been much talk about the goal of achieving developed country or Viksit Bharat status by the 100th anniversary of Independence (i.e. India@100).

Much of the discussion has been on the arithmetic required to get there. Both the post-election *Economic Survey* and the *Union Budget* allude to the next generation of reforms required to make this happen but are scant on details. For any country to achieve developed country status, it must not only grow significantly for an extended period of time, but the nature of that growth must also evolve from one that is based merely on "quantity" to a broad-spectrum one based on "quality". I introduced this idea in my column written prior to the election. In a series of columns, I will expand on the quality reform agenda that is required for India over the next three decades to first get to upper-middle income status and then improve the odds of achieving a fully developed country status.

The idea of a quantity to quality (QtoQ) transformation is almost fully self-explanatory in its objective. Some have called this the "brawn" to "brains" transition. It is easily illustrated with an example in primary education where the goal shifts from the number of children enrolled in schools and coverage of the eligible population to one that is based on outcomes for reading, writing and arithmetic at each grade level. Much of the focus for the QtoQ transformation is on developing human talent. In addition, some of the QtoQ elements need to focus on depth, sophistication, availability and pricing for the enabling environment in financial, housing, logistics and other markets.

This first column in the series focusses on the importance of quality public health initiatives to create the population foundation upon which a QtoQ transformation can be built. The word "public health" is broad and encompasses vaccination, nutrition, operationalizing the latest scientific advances and wide access to primary care. Only a healthy generation can beget an even healthier next generation. Reforms and implementation in this area are a prerequisite for India to make developmental progress.

Take for instance the Under five mortality rate (U5MR), which is the probability that a newborn would not survive until her fifth birthday. Even though it has been coming down steadily over the decades, it is 29.2 per 1,000 live births in India versus an average of less than 5 for OECD countries. Progress into the teens and below for India will become harder and harder to achieve.

Prior to birth, the age, nutritional status and general well-being of the mother become especially important in determining the birthweight of the baby and the cognitive capacity of the newborn. Low birth weight (LBW) in India (defined by the World Health Organization to be any baby less than 2,500 grams at birth) continues to plague India. In India, LBW babies represent about 17.5% versus a global average of 14.6% and an OECD average of about 6%. LBW arises from maternal age, multiple pregnancies, obstetric complications, chronic maternal conditions like hypertension and diabetes, nutritional status of mother (particularly anemia) and substance abuse. In addition to a higher risk of early mortality, LBW babies can grow to have limited cognition, have life-long susceptibility to neurological and language impairments and are at greater risk of developing chronic disease.

Public health is part of a broad spectrum of key areas that we need to focus on as we aim for a Viksit Bharat

Vaccination campaigns (Mission Indradhanush) over the last decade have increased full immunization coverage among the 12–23-month-old children to about 76%. This means that progress needs to be made for fully a quarter of the population of children to achieve the goal of universal immunization coverage. Vaccine-preventable diseases like pneumonia, diarrhoeal diseases, measles and meningitis still account for over 300,000 annual under-five deaths.

Each of these metrics will become progressively harder to improve upon as India reaches the limits of marginal effectiveness as the law of diminishing returns sets in. The QtoQ transformation will need to focus not only on "campaigns" and interventions but on creating an enabling nutrition and education environment for mothers with widespread access to primary care. A critical element of the QtoQ transformation is a shift from intervention to enablement and self-help. The state must build the capacity to go from acting in "mission mode" to promoting awareness and widening access, particularly for women and children.

There is some debate in academic literature about whether prosperity begets generational health or vice versa. A safe bet is that they move with interdependence and in tandem. Particularly because of the significant advances in public health and nutrition science and the experience of other countries, India can benefit by using a "public health"-based stepping stone to prosperity. Each healthy working age adult not only can contribute to their full potential, but they can also in aggregate improve upon the envelope of potential for their whole generation. Good health is an end in itself. It is both a moral and real imperative for a developed society. It is also an important contributor to raising income levels for individuals and in aggregate for the whole cohort in the generation.

P.S: "Quality is not an act, it is a habit," said Aristotle.

THEIR VIEW

A one-way street to net-zero will put us in a jam of our own making

Our energy transition will fail unless we also manage new energy demand so that supplies aren't always playing catch-up

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The energy transition challenge, often presented as a singular issue of greening our energy sources, is far from a one-dimensional problem. As with all public policy situations, the challenge is not amenable to a well-defined problem statement or an elegantly crafted solution. Two recent stories underscored the complexity of the task at hand. One, published in *Bloomberg* (*bit-url.top/mqy2Qr*), highlighted the frictions, high costs and inconvenience faced by buyers and sellers of alternative energy, demonstrating the absurdity of forcibly trying to wean the world off fossil fuels. The other, published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (*biturl.top/3i6ram*), illustrated that even as obstacles are faced in securing our clean energy supply channels, market forces are creating additional sources of significant energy demand, such as data centres for artificial intelligence (AI) and crypto mining, worsening the supply issues and undermining the net-zero goal.

The issues laid out demonstrate that the energy transition problem is two-fold. Securing and integrating green energy supplies are not as straightforward as one would expect. Secondly, even if the supplies are secured, this alone would not enable the world to progress towards net-zero. If the demand is not calibrated by policymakers, the energy supply will forever be left to play catch-up with exponentially higher demand, thus indefinitely delaying the goal of attaining a net-zero world. This is also responsible for the share of fossil fuels in global energy consumption having dropped a measly two percentage points in two decades—from 78.5% in 2004 to 76.5% in 2023 (*biturl.top/emAVny*).

The energy transition is easier said than done. Fossil fuels are integrated into every facet of our technologies and productive processes and are essential for many applications too long to be exhaustively listed. There will be no Lego toys without fossil fuels (*tinyurl.com/dppyhbws*).

Therefore, the focus must go beyond merely substituting traditional energy sources to incentivise the right energy sources that allow us to move to a low-carbon path without compromising our developmental goals. In India, the recent budget announcements promoting nuclear energy, more efficient thermal power plants, rooftop solar installation in over 10 million households, and emission targets for the industrial sector reflect the government's commitment to supply-side initiatives. The budget also seeks to promote the creation of pumped storage units, thus facilitating higher levels of renewable energy integration by addressing the intermittency issue and reducing the critical mineral import dependence required for battery storage systems.

Second, while the world is focused on finding ways to green our energy consumption, they ignore the root of the problem i.e. overconsumption. Current measures focus on greening the means to sustain existing consumption levels while ignoring that behavioural shifts in consumption patterns, lifestyle choices and resource utilisation are necessary to reduce carbon emissions. A case in point is the emerging global obsession with electric vehicles, which seek to replace gas-powered vehicles with alternatives that require nearly 10 times the minerals a conventional car needs. Mining and processing these minerals only demands more energy to sustain an existing lifestyle. Along with the mad rush in the developed world to scale up energy-guzzling data centres, this epitomises misplaced priorities at worst and poor sequencing at best.

Policies adopted in the West have largely overlooked the potential of promoting individual-level actions and their impact on reducing overall emissions in the economy. While India has yet to reach the levels of per-capita income and per-capita emissions witnessed in the developed world, awareness created early can be a powerful tool in the fight against climate change. The collective sum of individual actions can contribute greatly to the mitigation efforts. Some actions include being mindful of how we consume energy (for instance, setting the air conditioner temperatures between 24 to 27 degrees Celsius), using public transportation more, integrating more plant-based foods in our diets, minimising water wastage, and keeping our local surroundings clean.

Since the transportation sector is a large consumer of fossil fuels, public transport systems must be a big part of the solution. Incentivising and subsidising private mobility runs counter to the goal of reducing fossil fuel dependence. Investments made in making public transportation efficient, reliable, comfortable, accessible and safe will be far more rewarding. Comparative statistics show that over 80% of urban residents in developed countries live within 500meters of public transportation. In comparison, over 50% of urban residents have convenient access to mass transit in Brazil and China (*biturl.top/yArMna*). In India, only 37% of urban residents have easy access to public transportation. To emulate their success, India needs to develop integrated transport systems that connect buses, metro rails and other modes of transport. Ensuring effective mass transit infrastructure in urban areas is integral to reducing our energy intensity and achieving energy self-sufficiency.

Lastly, demand-side policies must also be complemented by measures that seek to curb excessive use of water (*tinyurl.com/msm5tpp7*) and energy, such as data centres for AI or crypto mining. Regardless of whether these technologies are, on balance, public goods, their insatiable demand for water and energy warrants a tax on their resource usage to ensure accountability for the threat they pose to the energy-ecology-environment balance. Demand management produces tangible and positive externalities. Thanks to a slew of energy efficiency standards, fuel consumption standards for vehicles, and energy consumption norms for industries, India has succeeded in creating annual energy savings of around 51 million tonnes of oil equivalent, amounting to 6.6% of the total primary energy supply of the country.

In conclusion, emulating the Western model that has contributed to the current global climate crisis is not a viable path. India can lead by example, crafting policies that focus on its developmental goals while simultaneously addressing both sides of the energy equation. Continuing the strides made for securing supplies, the country must complement them with the Indian ethos-inspired demand management. Similarly, advanced nations must introspect and craft ways to rein-in their energy demand. Not doing so could lead to unprecedented financial and resource demands while intensifying geopolitical vulnerabilities and stress, inevitably leading to conflicts.

These are the authors' personal views.

MINT CURATOR

Labour makes its first climate blunder on the aviation sector

Approving airport expansion contradicts its climate action focus

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The party ought to have carved out a new direction for the industry. ISTOCKPHOTO

Since winning the UK general election in July, the Labour government has taken some strong early steps to push forward climate action, such as introducing Great British Energy, a new publicly owned energy company, and scrapping the onshore wind ban. It may have just made its first environmental blunder.

[Last week], ministers approved London City Airport's expansion plans, directly countering the recommendation from the Climate Change Commission, a government advisory body, that "there should be no net expansion of UK airport capacity unless the sector is on track to sufficiently outperform its net emissions trajectory." It's safe to say that the criteria haven't been met.

There is nuance in the decision, meaning that it's not an outright win for the aviation sector. London City's bid to increase the annual passenger cap to 9 million by 2031 from 6.5 million was approved, but the maximum number of aircraft movements—take-offs and landings—will remain at 111,000 a year. A request for extra flights on weekday mornings was granted, though the weekly 24-hour suspension of flights from 12:30pm on Saturdays has been retained—a small win for local residents desperate for peace and quiet.

The application was based on a commitment to allow only more efficient, quieter new-generation aircraft, such as the Embraer E195-E2 and Airbus A220-100, to fly during extended operating periods. That's a nice thought, but it's a far cry from the ambition the sector needs to slash emissions. Serving largely wealthy frequent flyers travelling for business, there are legitimate questions about who benefits from the London City Airport expansion. In 2019, approximately 43% of seats were occupied by folks who fly at least once every two months. Plus, analysis by think-tank New Economics Foundation found that 64% of journeys taken from the airport in 2019 could have been completed in two train journeys or fewer, while more than half could be reached in six hours or shorter via rail.

This isn't just about a single airport, however. Globally, the sector is expanding. There are currently 28,400 commercial aircraft in the world fleet, with more than 15,000 on order. Despite all these extra planes coming online, there's not nearly enough extra sustainable aviation fuel (SAF)—a term encompassing a range of alternative fuels, some more sustainable than others—to meet that demand. Just 0.17% of aviation fuel was SAF in 2023.

Meanwhile, innovative zero-emission aircraft powered by hydrogen or electricity are far from being commercially ready, and there's not yet enough incentives in place to convince airlines or airports to invest and prepare for them in the future.

Labour has room to take a bolder approach to ensure aviation has a sustainable future.

For instance, the UK and the EU now have SAF mandates. Beginning in 2025, a rising percentage of jet fuel will have to be SAF, with sub-targets for so-called power-to-liquid fuels, which are considered more scalable and able to achieve greater emissions reductions than waste-based jet fuels.

The problem is these advanced fuels are far more expensive than conventional jet fuel—as much as 120% to 700% more than their fossil fuel counterparts—making them cost prohibitive to adopt. But there's a way that Labour could address that while raising necessary funds for the transition.

Matt Finch, UK policy manager at Transport and Environment, a European advocacy group for clean transport, told me that any British motorist paid more in fuel duty the last time they filled up the tank than British Airways has ever paid because jet fuel is exempt, and only 30% of aviation emissions are included in the UK's emissions trading scheme, meaning there is effectively no carbon pricing on the fossil fuels that airlines are using. Research from T&E found that a kerosene tax in the UK, at the same rate that motorists pay, would have raised £6.7 billion in 2019. Labour has stressed that there's little money in the coffers. Well, that would raise some.

Any airport expansions should also come with conditions. Telling Heathrow that it could have its third runway on the condition that only zero-emission or SAF-powered planes can take off and land there, for example, may just spur airports and airlines to pick up the pace on decarbonization after decades of dragging their feet.

Nevertheless, the only sure way to reduce emissions from aviation in the short term is to fly less. That could change, but only if policy initiatives are adopted to shake aviation out of its hubris. With decisions expected soon on expansion applications from Gatwick and Luton airports, Labour ought to carve out a new direction for the industry.

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GUEST VIEW

India Inc is in a sweet spot but risks are looming too

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India Inc. is in a sweet spot. The country's economy is growing at a solid clip, helping propel the fortunes and prospects of Indian companies operating in a range of sectors, from telecoms, airports and ports to commodities, utilities and chemicals.

The economic tailwinds and improving industry conditions, however, aren't the only factors driving earnings growth and momentum across India's corporate space. Also helping the cause are rising cash flows, prudent balance sheets and falling leverage. This is despite several companies, across sectors, spending more on capital expenditure and energy-transition initiatives.

Alongside improving earnings and margins, supportive financial policies have also contributed to debt reduction for many companies. Over the past 12 months alone, we have seen asset sales from the likes of Vedanta, Tata Motors, Glenmark and Reliance Industries.

From a rating perspective, things are also on the up. Improving industry conditions and broad-based earnings growth, combined with balance-sheet strength and more-entrenched financial discipline, are improving the credit quality of the 30-plus India-based corporates we rate.

Following more than three straight years of net positive rating actions, our rating distribution among Indian corporates has shifted upward. Indeed, among our rated universe across the Asia-Pacific region, India now has the highest proportion of positive outlooks—around one-third of the Indian companies we rate.

Although our positive rating outlook on the Indian sovereign contributes to India's high positive outlooks relative to other markets, many of the sovereign rating-capped Indian companies we rate also have improving stand-alone credit profiles. For example, we upgraded Power Grid's stand-alone rating to BBB+ from BBB in July 2024. Excluding the sovereign-related outlooks, we have about one-in-six ratings on a positive outlook, which is still high.

Several factors are contributing to our favourable credit view. We forecast aggregate earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization (Ebitda) for rated Indian companies to grow 10% in 2024, driven by telecoms, airports, commodities and chemicals. Leverage will decline marginally, even though average capital expenditure is up 30% on pre-pandemic levels while free operating cash flow is increasing and spreading wider.

Another plus is that financing access and options have generally been deepening, with strong onshore liquidity and a lack of large debt maturities supporting liquidity profiles. Importantly, most companies have greater headroom over downside rating triggers, which will cushion any earnings disappointments or increased capital expenditure or mergers and acquisitions.

Economic tailwinds and healthy finances are brightening the outlook but watch for policy and other risks

Turning to specific sectors, companies operating in India's transportation infrastructure space are getting a further boost from traffic growth and tariff increases. Rising cargo volumes are supporting port revenues, while operating efficiencies are supporting stable margins. Similarly, airport traffic is rising above pre-covid levels, with higher tariffs improving airport operating cash flow. We expect India's robust airport traffic will continue to grow 8-15% after surpassing pre-pandemic levels in fiscal 2024, with Ebitda margins normalizing by March 2025. Lower capital expenditure and shareholder focus should also help improve airport credit quality.

For companies operating in the utilities space, rising demand and new capacity will support earnings, alongside moderating fuel costs. Capital expenditure in the sector is increasing, partly due to energy-transition plans. But growing earnings are keeping leverage in check. We expect power demand over 2024-2025 to grow 5-7% in India.

The commodities sector is benefiting from favourable prices, falling input costs and manageable capital expenditure, while companies operating in the telecoms sector are seeing improved average revenue per user (ARPU), rising tariffs and subscriber numbers, and moderating capital expenditure amid significant deleveraging after the 5G auctions in 2023.

Elsewhere, the operating performance and volumes for players in the auto sector have settled after experiencing significant supply chain issues in 2022, while the chemicals sector should see a sharp earnings rebound because of falling input costs and stabilized product prices.

Whatever sector we look at, there are some downside risks to consider. Although we expect policy continuity in India with the elections now past, any unforeseen sector-specific regulatory or government policy changes could have a significant impact on the outlook. For example, the recent court ruling on mining taxes in India has the potential to elevate production costs, affecting miners' profitability and investments. This, in turn, could hurt sectors that consume these materials, such as steel, aluminium, cement, oil and gas, and coal.

Likewise, any significant changes in overall financing conditions may have an impact, especially for those companies with elevated leverage, such as the ones in the renewables sector. Although external factors are somewhat mitigated by a strong domestic focus for many Indian companies, rising geopolitical issues, worsening global economic conditions, or weakening commodity prices are other factors to watch for in the near-to-medium term.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Give peace a chance

The Cairo talks represent a glimmer of hope for war ravaged Gaza in an otherwise bleak situation

As fighting continues unabated in Gaza, negotiators gathered in Cairo this weekend for crucial discussions aimed at securing a ceasefire. The talks come at a pivotal moment, with the conflict between Hamas and Israel now in its tenth month. Despite the ongoing hostilities, there is hope that a breakthrough might be within reach, though significant hurdles remain. The war has left Gaza in ruins and triggered a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions. The conflict has displaced nearly all of Gaza's population at least once, and efforts to broker a ceasefire have so far failed to bring lasting peace. The international community, led by the United States, Egypt, and Qatar, has been engaged in persistent but ultimately inconclusive negotiations to end the violence. The Cairo talks, held under the shadow of ongoing violence, are seen as a critical step towards ending the conflict. However, the talks are complicated by the fact that Hamas, while sending a delegation to Cairo, has stated that it will not participate directly in the negotiations. Instead, the Hamas delegation is expected to meet with senior Egyptian officials to receive updates on the progress of the talks. Hamas continues to insist on a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza, including from the Philadelphi Corridor along the Gaza-Egypt border, a key sticking point in the discussions. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has his own reservations and is unwilling to withdraw troops from border,

The framework for the current talks is based on a plan outlined by U.S. President Joe Biden on May 31, which has been endorsed by the United Nations Security Council. The plan envisions a three-phase process, beginning with a full and complete ceasefire, during which hostages would be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Despite initial agreement on the plan by Hamas leadership, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed reservations, particularly regarding the continued presence of Israeli troops along the Gaza-Egypt border, which he argues is necessary to prevent Hamas from rearming. The United States is exploring new proposals to bridge the gap between Israel and Hamas. The success of talks likely hinging on whether the U.S. can pressure Netanyahu into accepting a compromise. Meanwhile the war rages on in Gaza. Israeli airstrikes and artillery fire have devastated the territory, with reports of dozens of civilian casualties in recent days. The United Nations has reported large-scale evacuations from areas such as Deir el-Balah and Khan Yunis, as Israeli military operations intensify. The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire, with displaced families forced to flee daily in search of safety. Both Israelis and Gazans are increasingly desperate for an end to the bloodshed. Protests have erupted across Israel, with thousands calling for a deal to secure the release of the remaining hostages. The path to peace remains fraught with challenges, and the coming days will be crucial in determining whether a lasting ceasefire can be achieved.

PICTALK

A farmer harvests grapes, at Repora Lar area in Ganderbal, Kashmir PTI

Gender reform in 19th-century Bengal

RAJDEEP **PATHAK**

In the 19th century, a complex interplay of reformist and colonial influences emerged, particularly concerning the status of women

In the 19th century, as British colonialism reshaped the Indian socio-cultural landscape, intellectuals like Captain N. Augustus Willard and Indian reformers grappled with the status of women in India. Willard, like many British officials, viewed Indian women with a mixture of pity and a sense of moral duty, perceiving them as victims of ignorance, reflected in their preference for songs that were considered passionate and sensual. At the same time, English-educated Bengali elites, inspired by both Western ideas and traditional Hindu values, sought to reform women's education while retaining patriarchal norms. It is pertinent to mention the role played by the renowned social reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a key figure among the Bengali bhadralok, who championed the cause of widow remarriage and women's education.

Influenced by Western education, yet deeply rooted in his cultural heritage, Vidyasagar sought to balance these dual influences. He established numerous schools for girls, believing that education was essential for their empowerment and societal upliftment.

Another key figure in India's renaissance movement, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Chattopadhyay), a luminary in Indian literature, is celebrated for his seminal contributions to both educational reforms and the Indian freedom struggle.

His multifaceted legacy extends beyond his literary genius, encapsulating his role as an intellectual force in the socio-political landscape of 19th-century India. Bankim Chandra was a pioneering figure in the sphere of educational reforms in India. His vision for education was grounded in the belief that a modern, enlightened society could only emerge through an educated populace. Chatterjee advocated for the modernization of the education system, emphasizing the need to integrate Western scientific knowledge with traditional Indian learning.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's engagement with educational reforms is evident in his writings and his role as a Deputy Magistrate – the first in-charge (Sub-divisional magistrate) of the Arambag subdivision in West Bengal. He used his position to influence educational policies and advocate for the establishment of institutions that could impart contemporary education. Author of India's National Song Vande Mataram became a clarion call during India's Independence movement, Bankim Chandra's novels, often interwoven with themes of social and educational upliftment, served as a medium to propagate his ideas to a broader audience.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novels often depicted strong, complex female characters, who played crucial roles in the narrative, challenging the traditional views of women in society. "Vande Mataram," depicted in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel "Anandamath," serves as the manifesto of the Sanyasi group, celebrating a land abundant with rice, lush greenery, vibrant flowers, and sparkling rivers.

The song idolizes the country as a goddess incarnate. While historically and politically significant, "Anandamath" unfolds through semiotic, discursive, and aesthetic dimensions. The narrative, through characters like Mohendra, Kalyani, and Sukumari, intertwines with India's traditional and cultural contexts. The Santan of the Math, led by guru Satyananda and his disciples, embody qualities of truth, knowledge, emotion, patience, and being. "Vande Mataram" transcends patriotism, embodying philosophical renderings of existential and metaphysical human attributes, with women depicted as equals, exemplified by Shanti's bravery and sacrifice.Bankim Chandra's portrayal of women was significant as it challenged the prevailing societal norms and provided a progressive vision of women's roles in society. In "Devi Chaudhurani," (1884) the protagonist Prafulla transforms from a submissive girl into the powerful Devi Chaudhurani, a leader of a band of rebels. Her character embodies the potential for women's empowerment and the possibility of their active participation in societal change.

> BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY'S NOVELS OFTEN DEPICTED STRONG, COMPLEX FEMALE CHARACTERS, WHO PLAYED CRUCIAL ROLES IN THE NARRATIVE, CHALLENGING THE TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

By depicting women as strong, capable, and essential to the nation's progress, his novels contributed to the broader discourse on women's rights and empowerment in pre-independent India, which, however, is debatable.

Novels like "Kapalkundala," "Debi Chaudhurani," and "Durgeshnandini" feature characters such as Kapalkundala, Prafulla, and Ayesha, who exhibit depth and complexity. "Brishabriksha" (The Poison Tree) and "Krishnakanter Uil" addresses social issues like widow remarriage and polygamy through the stories of Suryamukhi, Kundanandini, and Rohini.

In "Sitaram," the tragic effects of polygamy are highlighted, while "Ānandmath" contrasts the nation's depiction as Mother, while the exclusion of women from the fight for its cause is also depicted. It can be said that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's depiction of strong, independent female characters – despite their complexities – challenged existing gender norms and inspired a rethinking of women's potential and place in society. By showcasing women as central figures in the fight against oppression and as leaders in their own right, Bankim Chandra's works resonated with the growing movements for social and political reform.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

Life's dilemmas: Lessons from everyday conflicts

SANJAY **CHANDRA**

We should recognise the value of pausing and reflecting, to determine whether our reactions to perceived insults are genuinely justified

We face conflicts and dilemmas many times in our lives. We resolve a few of those, avoiding others to avoid confrontation.

We went through some fascinating times recently. We cast our votes to elect the next central government. The excitement of the crowd at the polling booth was palpable even early in the morning. There was another major event, which was at our society level. We also had elections for the governing body of our residents' welfare association. I realised that the two elections mirrored each other. New alliances were formed, and old ones were discarded. Sworn foes smiled at each other with a warmth not unlike the hot Delhi summers. There were many heartbreaks too if friends vied for the same position. Two of the prospective candidates for a position went about venting their frustration when told by well-meaning friends about the intent of the other. I suggested a mutual tete-a-tete. The conflict was resolved.

I faced a dilemma as an adolescent half a century back. One afternoon, I had an argument with a friend, which went a little overboard, and I punched him. He was taller than me and did not take kindly to my aggression. He punched me back. It did not erupt into a full-blown fist fight only because I had already rationalised his punch a little before it had connected with my soft abdomen. After all, I had started the battle; he was entitled to retaliate.

Many of us hesitate to ask for personal favour, apprehensive of facing rejection. It is also a dilemma, albeit in our minds. I had no say in the allotment of the zonal railways after the completion of our railway probation training. I did get an opportunity to express my heart's desire, when my senior asked me if I had any preference for the place of posting. I was diffident and I gave a convoluted reply, "Anywhere, though my preference would be Mughalsarai." This was a small town in my native state. He took the first part of my statement at face value. I was posted at Sealdah, the other end, and a long way from my hometown - physically, linguistically, and culturally.

I understood much later in life the importance of plain speaking, however unpalatable it might be. It may cause initial bitterness, but the relationship would be stronger eventually. The self-realisation still did not give me the courage to upbraid a junior colleague for his tardiness. I chose to walk away from confrontation by not allocating him any responsibilities.

I envy those who have mastered sugar-coating the bitter pill. It softens the blow, yet hits the person equally hard. But it might even convey a wrong meaning. During a recent conversation, my wife and her friend contemplated conveying a rather difficult sentiment to another friend through a message. A small phrase was added to be polite. I felt that this changed the intent to something entirely different. They did not agree and chose not to send the message. Yet, the friend had not hesitated to upbraid another friend a few days earlier over a trivial issue. I saw conflict in the two situations, she did not.

Conflicts have been a part of our lives since ages. I would not like to be the Arjun who faced the biggest challenge of his life. I am a mere mortal. I have my follies. It is not for me to preach to be perfect. I would look at the words of author Jo Coudert to give me strength, "Every life is a dilemma that must be solved by the person living it."

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SANCTITY OF OATH

Madam — We all expect aspirants who desire to make a career in public service must be clean in their thoughts and acts. All MPs, MLAs take oath and swear on this but the reality is different. For those of whom read this information don't be confused and conclude yourself that this is the tally of medals in the recently concluded Paris Olympics 2024. Anybody would have been shocked and put their head in shame to feel pity for the people who have voted for the respective candidates from their constituency by the fond hope that they will deliver well for them. The update is that there are as many as 151 sitting MPs and MLAs declared cases related to crimes against women in their election affidavits, with West Bengal having the highest number of lawmakers facing such cases, according to a recent report by a poll rights body.

West Bengal tops the list with 25 sitting MPs and MLAs facing charges related to crimes against women, followed by Andhra Pradesh with 21 and Odisha with 17, according to the report that comes under the ongoing nationwide protests. BJP tops the list with 54 MPs and MLAs facing charges of crime against women, and Congress follows with 23. It would be more appropriate if the law takes its course to prove or clear those of charges by putting them before the fast track so that people's trust on them can be delivered on its own merits.

A P Thiruvadi | *Chennai*

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Madam—Today, we are facing a serious threat in the form of youth unemployment, which is hindering India's long-term development and growth. It stresses the need to tackle this problem for sustainable economic development. A few announcements have been made in the recent budget to address the issue of the job crisis in India. The key factors responsible for the employment crisis are outdated labor laws acting as disincentives for large-scale employment. The government's past efforts to enhance private investment have mainly been focused on increasing production activities rather than creating jobs. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the share of unemployed youth in the total unemployed population was 82.9% in 2022.

The government of India should consider increasing industrialization and investment in agriculture, as it can create more job opportunities and boost the productivity of the overall nation.

Neha Tomar | *Ujjain*

PROTECT TEMPLE LANDS

Madam — In the state of Andhra Pradesh, many temple lands have been illegally occupied and used for unnecessary constructions. Due to this, the temples are not able to conduct their puja programs properly. Strict measures should be taken to prevent land encroachment.

There should be important laws and regulations for the protection of lands. Such laws need to be framed and strictly enforced. Special ordinances should also be framed to protect temple lands. People's cooperation is very important for the protection of temple lands. Conservation of lands is possible if temples, their administrators and local people work together.

All necessary measures regarding protection of lands can be taken by deputing specially trained personnel to protect temple lands. By recording land status and other details in digital form, illegal encroachments can be detected quickly. It is good for conservation of lands.

Protection of temple lands means protection of spiritual, cultural and social rights. Hence, it is imperative that the government, local institutions, and people work together.

Appanna Gonapa | *Visakhapatnam*

Chalk vs cheese!

This relates to your edit "Surging Ahead" (Aug.24). Words, they say, are the dress of thoughts. And it is by their words that Americans are today judging Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Trump's utterances are akin to Modi's in the last lap of the 2024 elections when he neither had issues nor proper words to bash the Opposition with. He spoke like one cornered and defeated, rather than one who was optimistic of winning the election. In the end, his "mutton, mughal and mangalsutra" rants did not resonate even with those aligned with the BJP. In the fight for the US' presidency, Trump is not coming out trumps with his all too palpable lies, slanderous remarks at Kamala and his fist-pumping which is not helping him or his party to take the battle into the 'enemy' lines. Poor leadership is on full display, with Trump seemingly tilting at the windmills. In contrast, Kamala has shown much grace, sense and sensibility as she speaks about issues rather than engaging with Trump in a shouting match. Trump already has the baggage of making the USA a laughing stock of the world with his open calls for violence and questioning institutions that constitute America's bedrock of democracy. As the hour of reckoning approaches, it is becoming increasingly clear that it's going to be chalk Vs cheese, and that there are no fence-sitters this time.

Avinash Godboley | *Dewas*

Send your feedback to:
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Balancing Act

The latest remarks from the US Federal Reserve Chair, Jerome Powell, mark a significant turning point in America's monetary policy landscape. After a prolonged period of elevated interest rates aimed at combating post-pandemic inflation, the Fed is now signalling that the time for rate cuts may be approaching. However, the cautious tone of Mr Powell's speech at Jackson Hole, Wyoming underscores the complexity of the economic situation and the challenges ahead for the central bank.

At the heart of Mr Powell's message is the Fed's shifting focus from inflation control to safeguarding the job market. Inflation, which surged during the pandemic, has finally moderated, with the latest figures showing a decline to 2.9 per cent, the lowest since early 2021. This downward trend in inflation is a clear sign that the Fed's aggressive rate hikes over the past two years have had their intended effect. Yet, this success comes at a cost: a slowing labour market and rising unemployment.

The unemployment rate has inched up to 4.3 per cent, and job gains, once robust, have begun to taper off. This shift has reignited concerns that the Fed's policies, while effective in curbing inflation, could ultimately stifle economic growth and lead to a recession. Historically, the US has experienced recessions following most of the Fed's previous rate-hiking cycles. The question now is whether the Fed can manage a soft landing, reducing rates without triggering a significant economic downturn.

Mr Powell's speech suggests that the Fed is aware of these risks and is prepared to adjust its policies accordingly. However, the lack of concrete guidance on the timing and extent of rate cuts reflects the uncertainty that still surrounds the economic outlook. The central bank is clearly waiting for more data before making any definitive moves, a prudent approach given the unpredictability of the post-pandemic economy.

The broader implications of a potential rate cut are significant. Lower interest rates would provide relief to businesses and consumers alike, reducing borrowing costs and potentially spurring investment and spending. This could help counteract the slowdown in job growth and prevent further increases in unemployment. On the other hand, cutting rates too quickly or too steeply could reignite inflationary pressures, undoing the progress made in recent months. The Fed's challenge, therefore, is to strike the right balance between supporting the labour market and keeping inflation in check.

This balancing act is further complicated by external factors, including global economic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, which could impact US economic stability. The Fed's next steps will be critical in determining the trajectory of the US economy. As the Fed navigates this delicate transition, its ability to balance competing economic priorities will be tested. The outcome will have far-reaching consequences, not only for the US but for the global economy as well.

Indonesia's Struggle

Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy, is once again in the throes of political unrest. Thousands of protesters have taken to the streets, demanding transparency and fairness in the country's electoral process. This wave of protests comes at a critical juncture in Indonesian politics, as the long-serving President Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, prepares to hand over the reins to his successor, Prabowo Subianto, in October. The unrest reveals deep concerns about the state of democracy in Indonesia, particularly the influence of political elites and the potential erosion of democratic norms. At the heart of the protests is a growing fear of political manoeuvring aimed at consolidating power within Jokowi's circle.

The outrage was sparked by a parliamentary attempt to amend election rules, a move that many view as a blatant attempt to favour Mr Jokowi's allies and family members. The most contentious issue is the potential candidacy of Mr Jokowi's 29-year-old son, Kaesang Pangarep, in regional elections. This has led to accusations of nepotism and fears that Indonesia's democratic institutions are being undermined by the very leaders who are supposed to protect them.

The protests reflect a broader anxiety about the trajectory of Indonesian democracy. Mr Jokowi, who has been in power for a decade, has enjoyed significant popularity, but his influence now appears to be extending beyond his tenure. Critics argue that his efforts to secure a political future for his family members and close allies represent a worrying trend toward the concentration of power. This situation is reminiscent of other Southeast Asian nations where political dynasties and entrenched elites have stifled democratic progress.

The role of the Election Commission has become a focal point in this struggle. Protesters are demanding that the commission issue clear and fair rules for candidate eligibility, free from political interference. The commission's upcoming decisions will be critical in determining whether Indonesia's elections remain a legitimate expression of the people's will or become a tool for further entrenching the power of the ruling elite. The commission must uphold its duty to ensure a level playing field for all candidates, regardless of their political affiliations or family ties.

Beyond the immediate controversy over election rules, the protests also reflect a broader dissatisfaction with the state of governance in Indonesia. For many Indonesians, the situation highlights the persistent issues of corruption, nepotism, and the lack of accountability among the political elite.

The fact that protesters have taken to the streets in multiple cities, braving tear gas and water cannons, is a testament to the depth of their frustration. As Mr Jokowi prepares to exit the political stage, his legacy is increasingly being called into question. Will he be remembered as a leader who strengthened Indonesia's democracy, or as one who allowed it to be weakened by political manoeuvring? If Indonesia is to maintain its status as a vibrant democracy, it must resist the temptations of power consolidation and ensure that its institutions remain robust and independent.

'A continent divided'

It was Dr Papiya Ghosh, professor of history in Patna University, who in an essay 'Reinvoking the Pakistan of 1940s: Bihar's Stranded Muslims', shifted the focus from the traumatized north-western provinces of Punjab, Sindh to the equally devastated eastern India ~ the provinces of Bihar and Bengal from where almost 700,000 refugees who were Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims headed towards East Pakistan. These were the mujahirs as refugees came to be called, a term which has continued to define as well as degrade them

In 1969 WH Auden, the celebrated British poet published 'Partition', a poem which is a tragic reminder of when riots, rapes, atrocities, massacres and savagery raise high the bar of inhumanity in our land: "Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police night and day / Patrolling the gardens to keep the assassins away, / He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate / Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date / And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect, But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect / Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot, / And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot, / But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided, / A continent for better or worse divided."

The man in question was Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a lawyer by training and a confidante of the Viceroy of India Lord Mountbatten. The mansion was in New Delhi where Sir Radcliffe redrew the map now dividing the sub-continent into India and Pakistan, with a West Pakistan and East Pakistan or East Bengal as its territories.

The Radcliffe Line on the map is immortalised in contemporary history through the Partition in 1947; it mutilated, mauled and scarred an ancient land, the repercussion of which continue in modern Pakistan, East Bengal, now the nation of Bangladesh, and India that is Bharat.

"Never before in South Asian history did so few people decide the fate of so many in northern India," wrote Prof Mushirul Hasan of Jamia Millia Islamia, aptly summing up of the Partition.

The lives and experiences of people ~ who lived through the horror of those times, their identities and uncertainties created, reinforced by the Partition ~ continue to be invoked not just in history books but in literature and poetry, theatre and films, political circles and in public memory. The traumas and tragedies of migration in north India came to symbolize the Partition, becoming a socio-cultural stereotype, a metaphor in itself.

Undoubtedly the Partition saw the largest single bilateral flow of people with about six to seven million Muslims moving from the minority provinces of India to Pakistan, and nearly a million Hindus and Sikhs moving from Pakistan to India in 1947, though by 1951 the numbers had risen substantially. India and Pakistan kept their borders open till 1951.

It was Dr Papiya Ghosh, professor of history in Patna University, who in an essay 'Reinvoking the Pakistan of 1940s: Bihar's Stranded Muslims', shifted the focus from the traumatized north-western provinces of Punjab, Sindh to the equally devastated eastern India: the provinces of Bihar and Bengal from where almost 700,000 refugees who were Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims headed towards East Pakistan. These were the mujahirs as refugees came to be called, a term which has continued to define as well as degrade them.

Dr Ghosh, in her scholarly essays titled 'Community and Nation', highlighted the migration of Muslims from Bihar to escape the 'dread of the Hindu majority', and the unprecedented scale of the 1946 riots that made it a turning point.

She wrote: "Between August and mid-October 1946 communal tensions had been brewing due to the Calcutta riots and the formation of the interim government by Nehru. In Bihar the riot was triggered by rioting following a hartal in Patna on 25 December which was observed as the Noakhali Day. On 26 December, Hindus from villages north of Chapra attacked Muslim tolas, killing 20 persons. The riot spread to the Jehanabad division of Gaya and into Munger on 27 and the following day to Bhagalpur. In almost a week of rioting 7 out of 16 districts, and about 750 out of 18869 villages were affected. The number of Muslims killed in the riot became a point of dispute, with the Congress maintaining initially that it was about 2000 and then 5400. The Muslim League figures varied from 40-50,000. According to the government more than 20 Muslims were killed in about 69 Bihar villages of which 46 were in Patna district alone, where killings totalled about 4062. Other districts affected were Saran, Gaya, Munger, Saharsa, Bhagalpur and Santal Parganas."

RAJU MANSUKHANI
The writer is an author on history and heritage issues, and a former deputy curator of Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya

After two days of touring which he found 'full of horror', Pandit Nehru wrote that though the Muslim League accounts had exaggerated here and there the real picture was quite as bad, and sometimes even worse than anything they had suggested. There had been a definite attempt by Hindu mobs to 'exterminate' the Muslims. Men, women and children were killed indiscriminately. A madness seemed to have seized the people.

What Dr Ghosh underscored is the importance of understanding the way in which a corporate identity was thrust on the Muslims. It was a hegemonic identity created by the Muslim League; far removed from class, regional or linguistic differences within the vast and diverse Muslims spread across the sub-continent.

"The organisation of Muslims as a religious community was based on false assumptions," she wrote, adding that since 1937, both the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha were working in tandem to generate monolithic constructions of Muslims and Hindus. The Congress, in turn, avoided confronting communalism. In the aftermath of the Bhagalpur riots, leaders like Pt Rajendra Prasad focussed the party's attention on Muslim League while blaming the Hindu Mahasabha as the lesser evil.

A month after the Partition had become a reality, Prime Minister Nehru said in the press statement on 16 September 1947, "When the current turmoil ends, the two states (of India and Pakistan) might unite by the free will of their peoples."

Nehru believed that the division of India was a short-term political solution which could not override cultural affinities and economic compulsions. The Government of India disavowed any intention of harming Pakistan or treating it as an enemy.

Similar were the views of Mahatma Gandhi, who writing in the Harijan on 5 October 1947 said, "It is true that there should be no war between the two Dominions. They have to live as friends or die as such. The two will have to work in close co-operation. Inspite of being independent of each other, they will have many things in common. If they are enemies, they can have nothing in common. If there is genuine friendship, the people of both the States can be loyal to both. They are both members of the same commonwealth of nations. How can they become enemies of each other?"

The horrors, public traumas and communal violence during the months of July to December 1947 were unparalleled in their scale. "It is a human earthquake," said Nehru, in his speech in Lahore on 8 December 1947, referring to this violence and chaos which engulfed the divided Punjab.

The Prime Minister was witness to the migrations of millions of non-Muslims from what was to become West Pakistan and his helplessness is apparent in letters and official notes.

Nehru's biographers, especially Sarvepalli Gopal, have chronicled the collapse of the non-League government and the way communal tensions had grown as the administration could do little to prevent or stem the tide of violence and hatred.

Yet no one, neither the Government of India nor the leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League, had paid much attention to this gathering potential of tragedy.

There was surprise and a sense of helplessness in the new government. Undoubtedly the political turmoil, migrations, killings, and massacres were unprecedented.

Added to it was the attitude of the law enforcement agencies who, it was believed, had also participated in the massacres on both sides. "It is the bounden duty of the majority in Pakistan, as of the majority in the Union, to protect the small minority whose honour and life and property are in their hands...." Mahatma Gandhi's words from the pages of Harijan were making these heart-rending pleas. "To drive every Muslim from India and to drive every Hindu and Sikhs from Pakistan will mean war and eternal ruin for the country," he wrote on 28 September 1947.

End note: Time, geography and history has made it possible for the author, a third generation Sindhi Hindu refugee, to pay homage to those who suffered Partition traumas; and to his former teacher Dr Papiya Ghosh who spent a lifetime writing about the turbulent decades till miscreants in Patna put an end to her brilliant life in 2006. Murder most meaningless and foul, almost like a re-run of the riots, looting and deaths she wrote about when the continent was divided.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

Has Bhutanese tourism realised the sunk-cost fallacy?

Tourism in Bhutan began in the 1970s with government-led initiatives and was later privatised in 1991. The "high value, low volume" policy introduced by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and further nurtured by His Majesty The King has effectively shielded the nation from the negative impacts of mass tourism while generating significant revenue.

According to the TCB Report 2020/21, Bhutan's tourism sector earned USD 225.87 million in 2019. This noble policy has established Bhutan as an exclusive tourism destination and was dubbed as one of the best travel destinations in the world. For example, Bhutan was awarded the Travel Destination Award by Voyage Magazine in China on January 31, 2024, and was ranked as the second-best travel destination of 2023 and the best in Asia by Travel Lemming, a prominent online travel resource with over 6 million viewers.

Additionally, Lonely Planet named Bhutan the World's Best Tourist Destination in 2020. However, recent erratic changes in tourism policy post COVID-19 and inadequate public infrastructure at tourist sites have hindered the sector's growth and its potential socio-economic benefits. When tourism reopened in 2023 after the pandemic, Bhutan implemented a significant increase in the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF), raising it from USD 65 to USD 250 per day ~ a 285 percent hike. This sharp rise has substantially deterred tourist arrivals and raises the question: Was the "High Value" policy taken too far? In contrast, neighbouring countries have adopted more flexible approaches.

For example, Thailand set a target of 10 million tourists upon reopening and introduced several favourable measures, such as extending the visa-on-arrival duration from 15 to 30 days and waiving visa fees for Chinese and Kazakhstani tourists. These policies not only helped Thailand surpass its tourism targets but also accelerated economic recovery. Additionally, Thailand has expanded its visa-free entry list from 57 to 93 countries, including Bhutan, allowing for a 60-day stay to further boost tourism and economic growth.

Soon after Bhutan's tourism reopened with the new policy, most tourists who arrived had already planned their trips under the previous SDF rates. Gradually, tourist numbers began to decline once the revised SDF rates took effect. In an attempt to attract visitors, the government introduced various packages, such as the 4+4 and 7+7 schemes.

However, since tourists typically plan their vacations months in advance, these packages had little immediate impact. This challenge may have prompted the introduction of incentives for MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) tourism to reinvigorate the struggling tourism sector.

In 2023, Bhutan experienced a dramatic 67 percent drop in tourist arrivals compared to 2019, the highest decline among South and Southeast Asian countries dependent on tourism, including Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Nepal.

The change of tourism tagline from "Bhutan, Happiness is a place" to "Bhutan Believe" marked a significant change in the marketing strategy. This change diverges from a long-standing emphasis on Gross National Happiness (GNH), a noble concept introduced by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo in the early 1970s.

KUENSEL

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

India's empathy

SIR, Apropos your editorial "Modi in Kyiv" (August 25), the Prime Minister's visit to Kyiv was a landmark moment in India's diplomatic outreach, reflecting a delicate yet resolute approach to global conflicts. In his meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Modi reaffirmed India's strong commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity while making an impassioned call for peace and dialogue.

His concern for the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine was evident, as he highlighted the need for immediate and sustained efforts to alleviate the suffering of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

Modi's visit wasn't just about navigating geopolitical complexities; it was also a demonstration of India's deep empathy and responsibility as a global leader.

By offering India's support for humanitarian aid, Modi underscored the importance of providing medical assistance, food supplies, and shelter to those most affected by the conflict.

He stressed that India's role should not be limited to diplomatic mediation but should extend to addressing the human cost of war.

In addition to his humanitarian focus, Modi discussed broader issues such as global food security and energy stability, areas that are critically impacted by the ongoing conflict. He proposed exploring collaborative efforts to ensure that the disruptions caused by the war do not lead to widespread famine or energy crises, particularly in vulnerable regions around the world.

Furthermore, Modi's visit opened doors for deeper cooperation between India and Ukraine in fields like healthcare, education, and technology, emphasising India's willingness to contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.

This engagement reflects India's broader vision of being a responsible global player, one that prioritises human welfare and global stability while carefully balancing its historical relationships and emerging partnerships.

Yours, etc., Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh, 25 August.

ASSAM CASE

SIR, This refers to the report, "Prime accused in Assam gang rape case drowns; tried to escape, say police" (25 August). The accused, Tafazul Islam (24) in the alleged gangrape of a teeage girl in Assam's Nagaon district died in police custody on the intervening night of Friday and Saturday. He was the only one of the three arrested so far and was charged under sections of BNSS and the POCSO Act.

The police claimed that he had been taken to the crime scene late in the night when he attempted to escape and jump into a lake. It is sheer apathy indeed.

A judicial inquiry seems imperative for custodial death under 'culpuble homicide not amounting to murder'. The BJP is training its guns on the Trinamul Congress government in West Bengal over the R.G. Kar rape-murder.

As a ruling party in Assam, it must ensure exemplary punishment to the police not only for dereliction of duty but also failure to arrest the other two accused in the Nagaon case.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 25 August.

DEPLORABLE ALL

SIR, A series of heinous crimes against women happened in Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Maharashtra in the month of August.

On August 8, the mutilated body of a nurse at a private hospital was found in Rudrapur, Uttarakhand. She was allegedly strangled to death, and her head was smashed with a stone after being sexually assaulted when she was returning home from work.

On August 9, the body of a trainee doctor was found at the seminar hall of the R G Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. She had allegedly been raped and murdered.

On August 12, the body of a 14-year-old Dalit girl was found in a semi-naked condition in a pond in Muzaffarpur district, Bihar. She was allegedly gang-raped and killed.

On August 13, a teenage girl had allegedly been gang-raped inside a stationary private bus at the inter-state bus terminus in Dehradun, Uttarakhand.

On August 22, the body of a 10-year-old girl was found in a field in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. She had allegedly been raped and murdered.

On August 24, two minor girls were allegedly sexually assaulted in Badlapur, Maharashtra.

Amid the rising atrocities against women all over the country, what we need is a protest against each of these heinous crimes.

It would be wrong to single out only the Kolkata rape and murder case for protest because all other incidents happened under a double engine government.

Yours, etc., Sujit De, Kolkata, 26 October.

A thought for today

These problems are solvable. A safer, free-speech respecting, more enjoyable social media is possible

FRANCES HAUGEN

Telegram, Detained

True: content moderation is complex. Also true: platforms are pinching pennies on the job

France's detention of Telegram founder and CEO Pavel Durov is surprising, everyone seems to agree. Billionaire tech bros usually don't get treated like this in democracies, no matter the angsty socio-political storms swirling around them. The thing on which opinion is divided is whether this is a dastardly attack on free speech. Fellow tech mogul Elon Musk insists it is. Hence him X-ting #FreePavel. But over the years, the "unprecedented liability shield" enjoyed by social media giants, as Trump called it back in 2020, has come into question worldwide. There is still a lot of friction over how exactly content moderation should be done on these platforms, but that it's essential is now the broad consensus, including in India.

Of course, Durov and company are right to stress how important free speech is to democracy. But hey, what about the algos? Most content is being spread via heavy-duty mediation.

The EU Digital Services Act, adopted in 2022, requires robust content moderation of the largest social media companies. It is nobody's case that guardrails for factuality are easy or simple to build. What's in question is how the social media giants construct teams to safeguard truth and safety, share core-metrics data with the public, and improve overall transparency. On all these fronts, experts say that recent years have seen more backsliding than progress. This is even as companies weaken privacy protections to let AI train on users' data. For countries like India, where such companies are ridiculously understaffed to begin with, frustration with the platforms only grows with their real-world consequences.

Even in this general sludge, the offensiveness of Telegram stands out. A standout feature is massive group chats of up to 200,000 members, which has really lent momentum to misinformation. This is how gruesome content from Gaza, for example, spread since Oct 7 last year. Supporters say this has been invaluable at a time when other social media companies took a more "pro-Israel" line. Different govts have also weighed heavily on this, which is a reminder that giving controls over to govts to deem what is objectionable content is also very harmful. Discussing the difficulties of content moderation is one thing, not taking responsibility for it is quite another. Actions taken to serve specific business models cannot keep enjoying safe harbour perks, and that too in the name of free speech. The better angels of our nature are better served by stronger content moderation teams and policies.

Bulldazed Due Process

In MP, another case of instant 'justice' as a house is bulldozed. SC has the power to stop cops. It must

Madhya Pradesh govt has supported its administration's demolition of a house of an alleged protester in Chhatarpur district. The house owner was allegedly part of a rally against a local cleric, who had earlier made remarks the protesters found objectionable. The protest turned violent. Stones were pelted, vehicles damaged, cops injured. Admin and police razed the "main accused's" house, justified it later, claiming it was "illegal". Point is, even for razing illegal shanties and structures, there's due process to be followed, which clearly wasn't even on the cards.

Heavy hand | 'Bulldozer justice' as the street calls it, is an instant justice mechanism of razing of houses, shops or any premises that belong to alleged protesters, rioters, history-sheeters, even undertrial rapists. Police and administration are judge and jury – it's scary that such lawlessness is backed by various govts. No legislation has razing houses as part of punishment for any offence, let alone the "offence" of dissent. Even for demolition of encroachments or illegal dwellings, Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasised rule of law – notice to be issued for starters. In the Chhatarpur case, instead of arresting protesters, they brought down the accused's house.

Court's call | Police have taken the law into their own hands – in UP's Prayagraj, Kanpur and Saharanpur, in Delhi's Jahangirpuri, in MP's Khargone, to name a few instances. But even SC did not put a stop to the demolitions, though it has real power to do so. Jharkhand HC recently directed the state to pay ₹5L compensation for demolishing shops, calling its actions illegal and random. If govts don't follow rules of fairness or give opportunity for affected people to be heard, brute force becomes practice. Will courts take suo motu notice of police conduct that is as lawless as the vandalism?

Hamlets, with Bluetooth

Neo-soliloquists flourish among modern audiences

Anupam Srivastava

It is evening. All by himself, he passes through a half-lit corridor to merge with darkness, and then, in a state of great agitation, emerges from it. His hands move rhythmically, in a smooth, practised sequence. He looks at the sky, his palms open, as though asking the heavens to open up and let him in on its secret. His lips quiver, but he remains inaudible, being at a distance from others. This is how the neo-soliloquists (using Bluetooth earphones) first made their appearance.

In those days, they kept their distance, sought privacy, and even feared being regarded as madmen speaking to themselves. Until then, soliloquies were only delivered on stage, by actors often playing lead roles – as Hamlet, Pizzaro, or Ghasiram Kotwal. Their monologues were exclusive to the audience, conferring a privilege on the latter – an insight into their minds – which other characters of the play didn't have. Only the audience knows of Hamlet's disapproval of his mother's marriage to his uncle a month after his father's death, or his dilemma expressed in the soliloquy: "To be or not to be, that is the question…"

Soliloquies are the best lines actors have. To have the stage to yourself and engage the audience by the power of your speech, is a heady affair. It also carries a huge risk. You can be greeted either by complete silence, a short laugh or a sigh, or, if the lines fall flat, by conversations, rustling of paper, and movement in the gangway.

The neo-soliloquist who has, since, been mainstreamed, is protected from the opinions of the audience. In a public park, or a metro train where every line he delivers can be heard by others, he discusses his business, or cajoles a distant lover. The audiences are engaged, but they pretend not to be listening.

A stage actor gets instant feedback after his performance. But the neo-soliloquist enjoys no rewards in the form of laughter or applause. He pleads with his lover to give him another chance and carries his joys and sorrows with himself when he departs. He will never meet his audience again or know, if he gets a second chance, that he had the support of the passengers of an over-crowded train compartment. And unlike Hamlet's audience, his co-travellers will never know how he fared, and how the story ended.

Dalit Politics, Sliced & Diced

In LS elections, bulk of UP's Dalit-MBC vote went to 'OBC' party SP, wiping out BSP. Subquotas bring new spin to Dalit politics – Mayawati finding new cause, Akhilesh looking to grow bahujan base

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When the Soviet empire crumbled after the Cold War, collateral damage was the unemployment of legions of highly skilled people. In no time, across nations, sports coaches, pilot trainers, engineers and scientists were the Russians. Now, imagine what happened to the behemoth of Dalit assertion and school of social engineering, Bahujan Samaj Party. How it unravelled was evident – at least 10of 37 MPs who won on a Samajwadi ticket in UP Lok Sabha elections have BSP roots, as do at least six nominees who lost. Even among BJP winners, and Congress losers, there's a fair share of ex-BSP netas.

Now, subcategorisation of SC quota threatens to reset Dalit politics in UP. Both BSP and SP have rejected it. BSP is looking to reposition itself as a champion of Dalit unity. SP's looking to further its inroads into the BSP bloc – both workers and voters.

Is it too late or can Mayawati's BSP hit reset? In UP LS polls, Akhilesh Yadav-led SP's win of 37 of 80 seats came against the blinding backdrop of Modi's Ayodhya temple inauguration in January. Answer to 'how SP did it' is a mix – Mandalite mobilisation, canny candidate selection, accommodation and appropriation of Rahul Gandhi's rising credibility among the subalterns.

As JNU sociologist Vivek Kumar said, Congress and Rahul's twin planks of social justice and threat to the Constitution appealed to Dalit insecurities. "Dalits were Congress voters for a long period, till parties like BSP emerged."

But an ignored factor was the steady infusion into SP of talent from BSP, particularly after 2022 UP state elections. Mayawati had all but abandoned the fight the last few years. She had contested the 2019 LS polls alongside SP, lobbing a challenge at BJP. It was a throwback to *'naife Mulayam-Kanshi Ram, hawa mein ud gaye Jai Shri Ram'* – the alliance of backward classes post-Ayodhya.

But the combine came up short and Mayawati lost no time in snapping ties. She cited lack of vote transfer from SP to BSP, but many saw hyper-focus of enforcement agencies on opposition netas as a factor. BSP slipped into inactivity. The party's crash to a solitary MLA in the 403-seat assembly in 2022 confirmed 'Behenji' was dismantling the war machine.

Left jobless by BSP's go-slow and prospects of a dead-end saw followers – painted blue in their head and heart, and armed with Kanshi Ram's handbook on mobilising the marginalised – begin their hunt for a new home.

It was but a quirk of fate that the Samajwadi camp, twice humbled by BJP, was in churn that very period. BJP had embarked on its own social engineering that used rabid communal appeal to polarise majority Hindus and a simultaneous "anti-Yadav" mobilisation that weaned away the "most backwards" from the supposed OBC monolith. BJP turned MSY's Muslim-Yadav combine into a red rag for, ironically, antagonistic social blocs of upper castes and the most backwards. The manoeuvre brought BJP an inconceivably large tent beyond any caste-religious arithmetic SP could muster.

Uday Deb

The twin churns, jobless BSP cadres and anxious SP planners, converged seamlessly. The blue migration to SP brought with it grassroots connect – Dalits, most backwards and Muslims. BJP insiders concede its newly constructed OBC base was shaken in 2022. Sections of major communities drifted towards SP, taking it to 111 seats from 47 in 2017.

As BSP fragmented, some Dalit sections fell into BJP's kitty too. This compensation – some OBCs along with a few Dalits in key regions – covered the cracks and blindsided BJP in 2022. The weaknesses were beyond repair once Akhilesh consolidated a base of Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhs, MBCs, Muslims and Dalits. *How* such transfers lifted SP mirrors how BJP rose in other states on the back of politicians imported from Congress.

Take, for instance, Lalji Verma. He switched from SP to BSP in Kanshi Ram's time, rejoined Akhilesh ahead of 2022 polls – SP won all five assembly segments in BSP stronghold LS seat Ambedkar Nagar. With Verma now SP MP from here, Ambedkar Nagar is no longer a BSP stronghold.

RK Chaudhary, Kanshi Ram associate who fell out with Mayawati and joined SP, won from Mohanalalganj, a reserved seat. He says, "BSP cadres are in desperate search of a movement," one that reflects Kanshi Ram's values. Irony is, says Chaudhary, "20 years ago, Kanshi Ram had a movement but few supporters. Now, people he prepared are ready, armed with the Constitution and democratic values, but there's no one to lead."

Into that vacuum stepped In Akhilesh's PDA (Picchda, Dalit, Alpsankhyak). "Kanshi Ram had corralled PDA into 'bahujan samaj'," says Chaudhary. This base is Akhilesh's PDA bloc today. Per Chaudhary, around 40% of BSP cadres, largely Dalit, voted SP – without any special outreach by SP. "Many of Kanshi Ram's people, like me, are in SP. We'll bring in more BSP workers."

"BSP workers" are the force – district and village level 'soldiers', trained to visit basti daily with a routine of songs and theatre, rousing pride and sensitising minds about the bahujan movement.

Many aspirants are eyeing the BSP slot. Newbie MP Bhim Army chief Chandrasbekar Azad won from Nagina LS seat, where BSP began its march in west UP. He suffixed 'Kanshi Ram' to his Azad Samaj Party name and has tried to wean away demoralised BSP sympathisers.

But Vivek Kumar rubbishes obituaries of BSP, arguing the Dalit vote shift may be momentary. "Parties like BSP born of a social movement never die. They experience a dip in fortunes. BSP faces a similar fate but still commands the loyalty of a large social bloc." Dalit politics is clearly in a state of flux.

'We should start weeping for Goa, just as we wept for Wayanad...India's climate disasters are man-made'

***Amitav Ghosh** is an author, climate commentator and winner of the Erasmus Prize 2024 for his contribution to the theme "imagining the unthinkable" through his work on climate crisis and human interactions. As heavy rains threaten havoc in Goa, he tells **Bappa Majumdar** what India should do to cope with the challenges of climate crisis and other threats to environment:*

Q&A

● What are the lessons from the landslides in Wayanad?

First, there are going to be more and more disasters of this kind across India, not only because of the accelerating impacts of climate change but also because of other kinds of anthropogenic impacts like road building, deforestation, rock and sand quarrying and faulty patterns of construction.

It's certainly true that mountain regions are especially vulnerable because of the threat of landslides, Glacial Outburst floods and so on. But we should remember that at the same time as the Wayanad landslides, there was massive flooding also in cities like New Delhi and Lucknow. In New Delhi three students died because they were trapped in a basement. Even the political centre of the nation, the new Parliament building, was flooded and this happened not only because of an exceptional weather event but also because the building itself was badly designed and hastily constructed. This is really a metaphor for what's unfolding around the country.

● Do other cities and regions like Goa face similar threats?

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, led by the great ecologist Madhav Gadgil, produced a report in 2011 that warned of the dangers Wayanad and the region would face if house building, road construction and settlement activities continued at the same pace. But the commission's recommendations were ignored.

And yet we refuse to learn. I watched a short video by the environmentalist Claude Alvarez in which he says it is time for the world to know that the current BJP govt in Goa is converting massive areas of previously protected hill slopes into development areas. This means that Goa too will soon have to deal with disastrous landslides. He says: "We should weep for Wayanad, but we should also start weeping for Goa." Goa is witnessing extreme rains again.

● India lacks a nodal department to work on forecasting floods and landslides.

Forecasting can obviously play a very important part in mitigating the effects of floods and landslides. But unfortunately, the present govt is proceeding in the wrong direction. So, for example, at the urging of NITI Aayog, 199 district agro-meteorological units were shut down in March 2024. These units had for many years provided free advisories to millions of farmers across the country. The intention, according to this report, is that these services should be privatised. So what we have here is a neo-liberal double whammy – allowing the construction industry to run rampant on the one hand, and on the other, shutting down governmental advisory services in favour of corporate profits. However, I would add here that we should not imagine that improved forecasting will be able to provide a magical fix to these problems. These are man-made disasters created by corruption and malfunctioning systems of governance.

● Is a centralised approach to tackle climate change a good idea?

The paradox of climate change is that it's a global phenomenon whose effects are always manifested locally. So forecasters may be able to tell us, for instance, that such and such city is going to be hit by a rain bomb at such and such time. But only people who know that city very intimately at a local level will be able to tell us which neighbourhoods will be worst affected. Often the people who have this kind of knowledge are those who are most likely to be ignored.

● Ecologically sensitive hill stations are teeming with tourists. Should there be some restrictions?

Yes, absolutely. In the long run hill stations and mountain regions will need to impose restrictions on tourism. They could perhaps impose ticketing systems or some kind, or lotteries. Bhutan has been an outlier in this regard. However, let us not forget that the central govt has itself been pushing to increase travel in some of the most ecologically sensitive regions, by proposing four-lane roads for the Char Dham. These projects will bring ruin upon the people who live in those areas.

● The presence of microplastics in Bay of Bengal points to a marine disaster.

We should not be surprised by the discovery of microplastics in Bay of Bengal. Microplastics are everywhere now, including the poles and in the high Himalayas, and they are already having catastrophic effects on human health.

Microplastics often contain phthalates, a class of chemical compounds that are also known as plasticizers because they are used to make plastics more flexible and durable – they are now found everywhere in the food chain.

Some scientists believe that phthalates are linked to the steep decline in male fertility that has been observed around the world in recent years. As to what microplastics are doing to marine animals and birds, the research makes one weep.

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacred space

Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small. A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

LAO TZU

Be Like Radha, Transcend The Dance of Thoughts

Swami Swaroopananda

The Supreme Lord taking a form and coming to live on Earth – because of His infinite love and compassion – is known as an avatar. When ignorance – in the form of a ten-headed ego Ravan, or a vicious Kans – creates havoc, good people entreat the Lord to appear and save them. The Lord takes birth repeatedly to bless the world.

It is important to note that whatever happens in the external world, in the macrocosm, also happens within us, in the microcosm. Krishn's avatar was in Dvapar Yug, but He can be born right now. Let us embark on a guided meditation and witness the birth of the Lord in our hearts.

Sit straight. Gently close your eyes. Relax your body. Inhale deeply. Then, as you exhale slowly, release all the tension in your body. With each deep breath, feel yourself sinking deeper into relaxation and stillness.

Krishn was born in the dark dungeons to Vasudev and Devaki at midnight. Imagine yourself living in the dark chambers of your mind bound by the chains of identification and attachments of the ego – Kans – in a jail of five gates or five layers – the physical body.

Acknowledge the presence of Vasudev, representative of the moody mind that has transformed and become divine, and Devaki, the intellect that belongs to the Lord. United in their search for the Truth, they neither oppose nor distract each other; wedded in divine matrimony they remain in contemplation, seeking the Lord alone. They represent an integrated mind and intellect.

Now, drop all other thoughts. With full knowledge of who he is, mentally chant with love: 'Shri Krishna sharanam mam.' Dwell in the space between the chants, wanting nothing but the Lord.

In the silence between two thoughts, peep into the beyond. In this sacred moment, catch a glimpse of the Infinite, the enchanting blue Lord of the universe. Feel your mind expand beyond its limits, embracing the vastness of the Divine. The avatar takes place the moment you discover that knowledge – the manifestation of consciousness, the birth – the direct knowledge of the Truth.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Once bhagwan's avatar manifests, the chains of bondage fall off, the doors open, the darkness of ignorance is dispersed, and all sorrows end. You are free.

But beware! The ego – as doubts, lack of faith, and skepticism – creeps in to destroy the little baby. For him to grow and thrive, transport him to the house of Nand Baba and Yashoda. In the lap of devotion, that tiny spark of knowledge is treasured and allowed to expand into a conflagration. Shri Krishn vanquishes all the binding factors within us.

Putana, his first victim, signifies false misconceptions, expectations, and notions, collectively representing our ignorance. Next to be eradicated is the inertia and materialism that entrap us. As the allure of materialism fades away, mental agitations and unchecked desires are conquered.

Take your time and allow this imagery to unfold naturally. Live free from body identification, master the senses – even while existing in this world – and attain the Divine. Be like Radha – transcend the dance of thoughts and merge into oneness with Krishn and achieve the essence of true meditation.

The author is the Global Head of Chinmaya Mission

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Israel vs Hezbollah

The US is letting things spin out of control

IN her acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention last week, US presidential candidate Kamala Harris vowed to always stand up for Israel's right to defend itself. This right, abused to the hilt time and again by Israel, has brought West Asia to the brink of a regional war beyond Gaza. The Israeli military has carried out 'pre-emptive' strikes against what it said were 'terror targets in Lebanon' after claiming that Iran-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah was preparing to fire missiles and rockets toward Israeli territory. Hezbollah has rejected the allegations but has responded with retaliatory strikes. Israel has brought it upon itself after it killed senior Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr in an airstrike in the Lebanese capital Beirut last month.

Tel Aviv is also being blamed for the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, even as Iran has renewed its threat to launch a retaliation. Unfortunately, Israel's persistent belligerence, bordering on reckleness, is not getting the international flak it deserves. The United Nations has merely warned against 'escalatory action', describing the barrage of attacks as 'worrying'. In the US, former President Donald Trump has confined his potshots to 'Sleepy Joe' while warning that World War III is not too far away. The Biden administration has certainly not helped matters by letting Israel get away with one provocative move after another.

Israel's actions have put a question mark on the efforts to resume talks aimed at wrapping up a hostage release and truce deal in Gaza. Lebanon, which had managed to hold its own in a month-long war with Israel in 2006, will find the going tougher this time in view of its prolonged political and economic crises. Israel, which fears there is an enemy behind every tree and beneath every rock, must be made to see reason as its military overzealousness is a threat to global security and stability. But the all-important questions is: Who will bell the cat?

Faith or folly?

The deadly cost of superstition in Punjab

THE horrifying incident in Gurdaspur, where a 35-year-old man lost his life at the hands of a pastor and his henchmen in the name of exorcism, is a reflection of the pervasive menace of 'faith healers' and 'miracle workers' in the region. The victim, subjected to brutal beatings, was allegedly being rid of 'evil spirits', an archaic belief that tragically led to his death. This incident is not merely an isolated case of misguided faith but a grim reflection of the dangerous power these pseudo-healers wield over the vulnerable.

Punjab has long been prone to such exploitative practices, where cultural and religious traditions often intermingle, creating a breeding ground for superstition. These self-proclaimed healers, masquerading as spiritual saviours, exploit the fears and insecurities of their followers, promising miraculous cures for everything — from physical ailments to mental illnesses. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of stringent legal frameworks to regulate or punish such practices. Often, these 'miracle workers' escape justice, shielded by the very communities they prey upon. The failure to hold them accountable not only emboldens them but also perpetuates the cycle of exploitation and abuse.

Punjab needs a comprehensive approach to combat this menace. Educational initiatives must be launched to promote scientific thinking and dissuade people from seeking help from unscrupulous elements. Communities should be empowered to distinguish between genuine spiritual guidance and harmful superstitions. Also, the state must implement stricter laws and ensure their rigorous enforcement to deter such practices. It is imperative that we, as a society, place our trust in rational, evidence-based medical and psychological care. Only then can we counter the dangerous delusions propagated by pseudo-healers. No more lives should be lost to such deadly deception.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27, 1924

Congress differences

IT is now more than a week since it was stated in a Calcutta telegram that Pandit Motilal Nehru had received an important communication from Mahatma Gandhi, making certain proposals for the settlement of differences between the two wings of the Congress. A later telegram stated that the utmost secrecy was being maintained regarding the nature of these proposals, and that it was understood that the Swaraj party had drafted a reply to the Mahatma's letter and was about to communicate it to him. About the same time, Sarojini Naidu, through whom apparently the proposals had been sent, stated to an interviewer that she had been discussing them with the Swarajists for two days, but that she was unable at that stage to give out the details of the proposals. Nor is Mahatma himself inclined to be more communicative. In the latest issue of *Young India*, there is not a word on this subject, while in a telegram to Mr Belgamwala, who had expressed his uneasiness at the prospect of a compromise, Mahatmaji further mystified the mystery by stating that there was no question of a compromise. Strange as it may seem, the nearest approach to an informed statement on the subject is contained in a telegram to the *Pioneer* from its Calcutta correspondent. After pointing out that Pandit Motilal Nehru and other leaders of the party were completely silent and no statement could be obtained from them at present, the correspondent said: "It is, however, understood from a well-informed quarter that Mr Gandhi is willing and anxious to cooperate with the Swarajists to the fullest extent but makes definite reservations with regard to certain articles of the Swarajist creed."

The great Indian transfer bazaar

The institution of the police and other civil services which constitute the criminal justice system lies broken

GURBACHAN JAGAT
FORMER GOVERNOR, MANIPUR, AND EX-DGP, JAMMU & KASHMIR

UNDER SCRUTINY: In the best of times, the police are feared, not respected, by the people. PTI

MY mind goes back to the mid-1990s when I was posted at the police headquarters in Chandigarh in an administrative capacity. One afternoon, the Director General of Police (DGP) called me over and desired that I should accompany him to a meeting with the chief minister at Punjab Bhawan. Both of us reached there in time but the CM was not there, after some time, a colleague of his turned up on his behalf. After the exchange of pleasantries, the minister pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it over to the DGP. My boss was well known for a short fuse and I could see him turning red in the face. He then handed the paper to me; it had a list of about 20 transfers. The proposed transfers were based on one principle: all the rakes go to the field and all the good officers to desirable jobs. The DGP asked me for my opinion. I seconded him and held forth that not even one proposal was acceptable. The DGP got up, and as we prepared to move out, the minister suggested that we could discuss the matter and make some changes. He was told in no uncertain terms that we were not into bargaining, and we exited the meeting on that note. I dropped the DGP at his place and told him to be prepared for a transfer. After two days, both of us were shifted out as also was the chief secretary (evidently, he had had a similar experience). However, times were different and values and principles still existed as none of our careers were adversely affected. In fact, the DGP went as the Governor of a state, the chief secretary as Principal Secretary to the PM and I was appointed DGP of Jammu and Kashmir.

This incident took place when we were still not completely out of the woods as far as militancy was concerned. Even otherwise, the old rules and regulations regarding postings and transfers were still being followed. Proposals were sent from the DGP to the Home Department and differences, if any, were ironed out between the home secretary and the DGP and then the names were sent to the CM. Also, because of militancy, the DGP's proposals were generally accepted. Even before this, the practice since pre-Independence times was the same and was meticulously followed. There was no question of large-scale political interference in these matters. Reforms were introduced in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in the mid-19th century (as a result of Lord Macaulay's 1854 report on the ICS) and the recruitment shifted from patronage to a merit-based system. These reforms were also introduced in the British Home Civil Service. In a paper written by Elke Frank (Hunter College, City University of New York), he describes the importance of the bureaucracy in transition: "Because bureaucracy is the 'core of modern government', the role of the bureaucrats is especially crucial in the process of political transition. When one government succeeds another, whether the transfer of power reflects a revolutionary change in the political system, or merely a reversal of party fortunes within the established constitutional framework, the bureaucrats are expected to remain at their posts and attend to the activities of government much as usual. However drastic the changes in the policy machine, the wheels of government may not grind to a halt. Essential programmes and operations must be continued; basic commitments must be respected, lest the whole social fabric disintegrate."

> Will this unholy alliance ever be broken? It seems only the combined will and strength of the people can fix this malaise.

It is this premise of meritocracy and that basic commitments must be respected which form the heart of democracy and a competent government. However, with the general fall in standards of political and administrative competence, accountability and morality, outside interference began to creep into the civil services. It began with those in power wanting officers of their choice in their areas of influence and officers using their political connections to go to positions they wanted — a quid pro quo was established. In the beginning, it was a trickle and then the floodgates opened. The reason for this was politicisation of the civil services and the emergence of the politician-criminal-police nexus, which was augmented by the introduction of the halqa incharge system by political parties (the halqa incharge went by different names in different states). Civil servants openly aligned with political patrons and in turn patronised criminal gangs in order to help their political masters with money and muscle. Transfers at the district and subdivision levels, i.e. of the DSP, SDM and SHO, were farmed out to the halqa incharge, who then became the conduit for these officers, whose allegiance was no longer to their seniors and the service but to this mafia. This development broke the back of the hierarchy in civil services and its moral spine, and the days of the civil services being committed to the rule of law were over. Most of the good officers were sidelined or opted for deputation to the Government of India (it took some time for the malaise to spread there also, but now it is well-entrenched).

Because of the increasing need for money and muscle, corruption grew exponentially, and big 'dirty' money came from organised crime syndicates which supplied the muscle also. It ushered in the era of full-time smugglers, drugs and money-laundering mafias — the gangs. Gangs that had never been heard of, but now it is difficult to keep up with their proliferation. There are gang shootouts, fights in jails and targeted killings of the drug mafia. In the extensive network here and abroad, the invisible hand of political parties is always there. This network has become even stronger as the way elections to the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha are conducted, they both need increased money and muscle power.

I have participated in scores of elections at different places and in different ranks. For the life of me, I have never been able to understand how the transfers of police officers and other civil servants just before the elections can affect their outcome. For example, the police, in the best of times, are not popular; people only fear them and not respect them. I do not understand how these 'chosen' police officers can help, except by providing men and money. They could be useful if there was total and open rigging, which thankfully is not the case yet. They are not capable of manipulating machines and this allegation has never been proved, especially when different political parties are winning and coming to power. Be that as it may, the institution of the police and other civil services which constitute the criminal justice system lies broken and unrecognisable from what it was. The judiciary, a crucial pillar of this system, also needs to introspect and find an answer to the millions of pending cases. We launch agitations and form taskforces whenever a gruesome incident takes place. However, with the passage of time, all is brushed under the carpet — but the nexus remains. Will this unholy alliance ever be broken? It seems only the combined will and strength of the people can fix this malaise.

The author is a member of the Tribune Trust

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When you see corruption being rewarded, you may know that your society is doomed. —Ayn Rand

Punjabi as 'father tongue'

ATUL JOSHI

MY mother often reminisces that theirs was one of the first Punjabi weddings in Yorkshire, England, in the 1960s. She shows newspaper cuttings to bolster her claim. The headlines read: 'The teacher weds the lady twice'. This was to acknowledge that my parents first had a conventional marriage at my maternal grandparents' place, followed by the registered court marriage. Though the Punjabi community in England was small, to begin with, the common thread of the native language of the early settlers wove them together.

When I was a child, one of my father's university colleagues (a British woman) wisely advised him to retain Punjabi as the language of conversation at home so that I could learn it and be connected to my roots. She opined, 'Your son would absorb English from the air, but the challenge would be to make him understand Punjabi.' As a rule, my parents would speak in Punjabi at home; I picked it up with ease and that made my father's heart swell with pride.

He had an intense attachment to his mother tongue, while having respect for other languages. It was no surprise that his PhD thesis in linguistics from the University of London was titled 'The phonology of the Punjabi verb'. Eventually, he returned to India, took up a university position, and we settled here. He was content that I went to a school that laid emphasis on teaching and learning Punjabi.

A generation later, my schoolgoing son had just been promoted to the senior section. It was time for him to choose an additional language, and he decided to take French. I asked him, 'Is there another choice?' 'Punjabi,' he replied nonchalantly.

I was quick to suggest that Punjabi should be his automatic choice. He claimed that most of his friends had picked French. He said it gave them an advantage to learn an international language, and it was fashionable to learn French. If at all he opted for Punjabi, his existing class section with all his friends would be changed. I looked at him and then played a masterstroke, 'But your mother tongue is Punjabi.' He carefully thought over it and then announced, 'I agree that my *nana-nani* speak Punjabi occasionally, but my mother tongue is Hindi since mom is from Ambala. She always speaks in Hindi.' I was nonplussed. Finally, I said, 'Son, in that case, your father tongue is Punjabi and that should be a good reason for you to consider taking it up!'

My argument convinced him and he dutifully opted for Punjabi. His section did get changed and his friends of five years were separated from him, but he honoured my pride in my mother tongue. I could see my deceased father's appreciation mirrored in my son's beaming eyes once he started learning Punjabi. May everyone's mother tongue flourish... with or without a nudge from the father!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Kangana must mind her tongue

BJP MP Kangana Ranaut's suggestion that the farmers' protest could have led to a Bangladesh-like situation in India if it were not for the strong measures taken by the Centre is unfortunate and uncalled for. Despite several rounds of talks, deadlock between the powers that be and farmers' bodies still persists. And the actor-turned-politician's irresponsible remarks have only added fuel to the fire. On what basis did Kangana liken the growers' agitation to the coup in Bangladesh? Notably, this is not the first time that she has courted controversy by making an outrageous statement. Just over two months ago, she got slapped at the Chandigarh airport over her past derogatory comments on elderly women who took part in the stir. As a sitting MP, she must be mindful of her words.

NK GOSAIN, BATHINDA

India's balancing act

PM Narendra Modi's recent visit to Ukraine highlights India's delicate balancing act amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. India has come under heavy criticism for not denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But those critics tend to overlook the complexities of the situation. The war is no longer just about Russia and Ukraine. It has devolved into a larger power struggle between Moscow and Washington. India, which has historically stood with the underdog, must navigate this great game skilfully. Modi's offer to play an active role in efforts to end the conflict demonstrates New Delhi's commitment to peace. However, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's sojourn in Washington raises questions about American pressure on India. As the world watches, India must continue walking the diplomatic tightrope.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

Centre takes the middle road

Refer to 'New Pension Scheme'; in the face of growing demands by employees' unions for a revert to the pre-2004 Old Pension Scheme, it seems like the Centre has decided to meet in the middle on the issue. The government's contribution under the Unified Pension Scheme will rise from 14 to 18.5 percent. The Central employees who joined after January 1, 2004, will greatly benefit from the scheme. But it is too early to tell if government employees will soften their stance and embrace the benefits of the scheme that provides assured pensions. We will know that in due time.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Ensure safety net for all retirees

Employees' unions must not oppose the new pension scheme just for the sake of it. It is imperative for all stakeholders to keep an open mind and understand the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between the fiscal burden on the government and the welfare of the employees. Concern for those working in the private sector is also legitimate. After all, India cannot claim to be a welfare state until and unless everyone is entitled to social security. Every retiree deserves to have financial support and a sense of security.

SADHNA SAINI, BY MAIL

US presidential race hots up

With reference to the editorial 'Candidate Kamala', regardless of who wins the election, it will be a victory for the Indian diaspora. If Trump returns to the White House, America will have an Indian-American Second Lady. And if Kamala prevails over him, she will make history as the first woman — who happens to be of Indian origin — to occupy the Oval Office. The election cycle will only get more interesting in the days leading up to the polls. Neither the Democrats nor Trump will shy away from launching personal attacks on each other. The battle lines have been drawn. It remains to be seen who will win over the White House.

YASH PAL RALHAN, JALANDHAR

Vote for leaders devoted to service

With reference to 'Himachal CM's Adviser Gokul Butail to take Rs 1 salary'; he has set a good precedent. Public representatives or servants throughout the country need to take a cue from Butail. His decision to accept just a token monthly honorarium of ₹1 reflects his commitment to public service. This should also prompt the electorate to vote for those candidates who have a desire to serve the country. The need of the hour is to ditch politicians who remain fixated on power and position.

RS KISHTWARIA, PALAMPUR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Gen FMCG's New Khana for Older Lot

Future-readying for a demographic reversal

FMCG companies, like ITC, are venturing into products targeted at an older consumer cohort with differentiation around healthy lifestyles. This makes business sense because of rising longevity and affluence. But marketing products for older people (45+) is a risky proposition. The old buy products pitched at the young because they don't want to be reminded they're getting older. The young reject products associated with age for precisely the same reason. This explains the remarkably small portfolio food companies have for an ageing population. Yet, food habits are acquired early, and causing a shift in consumer preferences towards healthier choices does expand the market. Food companies need to become future-ready for a global demographic reversal.

India's demographic transition is expected to be dramatic. The country is a few decades away from its peak population, which offers a big opportunity to market food to the young. But its population is also expected to age pretty rapidly, which requires food marketers to hedge their bets on the old. Besides, the country has a high incidence of lifestyle-induced health concerns that can be addressed by early movers in the food marketing business. And it also assists premiumisation, a process limited by slow rising incomes of India's young population. Food companies need a runway to establish new health brands, which if pitched right can draw in both the younger and older consumer cohorts.

Low penetration of packaged food in India improves the scope for experimentation. Nutritional deficiencies can be plugged equally by the food and health industries. Growing external exposure allows for considerable alteration in dietary habits. Traditional crops like millets that have been eclipsed by the national need to ensure food security are finding their way back into kitchens through packaged food. This has a bearing on sustainability of Indian agriculture. Pitched right to a discerning older target group, healthy products could keep food companies in good health for a fairly long time.

Let a Thousand Beauty Pageants Bloom

It may sound 'juvenile', but beauty contests are as good a barometer as any to measure diversity levels in society. It is in the level of opportunities available to all — or lack thereof — in such so-called 'frivolous' pursuits that one can gauge a true level of social mobility. Rather than relegating beauty pageants to the periphery — and, thereby, help perpetuate a 'closed club' system where only 1-2 types of contestants participate according to the yardstick of 1-2 types of taste — more such platforms across India's multi-tiers can throw up a more diverse set of winners. This is not just related to caste but also applies to all other excluded or underrepresented parameters.

When Madhu Sapre became Miss India in 1952, she broke the English-savvy 'barrier' among contestants. We have witnessed this democratisation most dramatically, of course, in the change in demography of our cricketers over time — the rise in popularity of women's cricket included. Broader attitudes — such as what constitutes beauty, and what promoters of such contests put premium on — will also expand accordingly. Increased opportunities at every level, through a transparent, accountable system, can change dogmas about what constitutes beauty, 'smartness' and 'pageant-winning' qualities and widen their scope.

In creating these multiple opportunities — and TV dance shows provide ample evidence of the success of such an approach — any 'political' debate confined to, say, caste will stop mattering. What will become evident, and indeed normalised, is a healthy representation from all quarters in beauty contests. From such an organic pool, who knows, we could get a 'new kind' of Miss India. Quite like we now have a 'new kind' of occupant at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

JUST IN JEST

Who cares if hugging is 'cultural' or not? It tells us about the hugger

Hugs, Minus Kisses, An Indian Press Note

As every kultur pehlwan knows, any action or behaviour can be sold as part of 'hamara' culture or tradition once one decides to sell it that way. It is the prerogative of every individual of every society to, at least, situate one's preferences as part of his or her culture. It provides one ballast. If you like to, say, drink soup from a straw instead of a spoon, you could say that such a way of intake is 'part of our culture'. Take hugging. There's nothing wrong or right with it — it's the individual's prerogative to hug (or be hugged/not hugged). So, if someone wonders why an Indian is a hughead — hugging everyone he or she meets — there is no real need to quickly say, 'That's because it's in our culture, you dimwit!' Either way, it doesn't matter.

Traditionally, we men, not so much women, hug at a drop — on festive occasions and celebratory ones. Some of us still into newspaper-reading (an Indian 'cultural thing') remember Fidel Castro hugging Indira Gandhi, quite an anomaly in the political circuit. Yasser Arafat did the same, providing solid ground to state that hugging is as much a radical Left cultural thing as it is 'Indian'. But used too many times and with everyone, the hug becomes much more about telling us the nature of the hugger and less about anything else, the nature of the relationship between hugger and hugee included.

STATE OF PLAY | India is making efforts to explore a third way to address the bipolar war

Trans-Europe Expressed

Pranab Dhal Samanta

Making the right tactical moves

India's Ukraine initiative has many layers to it. It's not based on the premise of any peace negotiation but on an articulation of Indian interests. This positioning combines with an emerging third dimension to what's otherwise looking like — as Monday's attacks confirm — an unending bipolar conflict.

Notably, India has been conveying a similar message to Russia despite higher dependency in the equation. But both New Delhi and Moscow are today on different strategic trajectories to further their national goals. Russia has chosen China as its dominant ally, even if that means long-term economic and technological dependency. This leaves Russia with no influence on China at a time when the latter is India's principal security threat.

In this context, India's deepening engagement with the West, its prospering strategic partnership with the US and diversification of its defence and hi-tech industry point to a pathway quite different from Russia's. In fact, for these reasons, Kyiv would feel that New Delhi ought to decisively weigh in favour of Ukraine alongside the West, stop oil purchases and use levers to apply pressure on Moscow.

But, from day one, India has articulated its position clearly that it would act according to its own interests. It has stuck to this line despite pressure from both sides. Two years into the conflict, this positioning is finding some resonance among countries within Europe, who while ardently supporting Ukraine in its war are beginning to nuance their approaches amid domestic political pressures — essentially finding non-military ways to end the conflict.

In this backdrop, Narendra Modi's visits to Russia and Ukraine should be seen alongside the two countries — Austria and Poland — built into the respective itineraries. These two countries are literally at the frontlines of the Nato and EU in this war. They also feel the impact of how Viktor Orbán in nearby Hungary, a Nato and EU member, has stalled Ukrainian aid packages within the EU until having extracted a concession. For instance, Hungary blocked a consensus on $54 bn aid package for months before reversing its position in February. A few months later, Orbán could sign a nuclear deal with Russia despite reservations from within EU.

Now, Ukraine has a 5-year deal with Gazprom to allow gas pipelines to transit its territory. This is up for renewal by the end of this year. If Volodymyr Zelenskyy decides against the renewal, which is his current position, Austria will be worst impacted as it gets nearly 95% of its supplies from Russia and is also a key junction point in the network for further distribution. Hungary, which will also be impacted, has already vetoed another EU assistance package, asking for conditions to be put on Ukraine for allowing transiting pipelines to function.

Narendra Modi's visits to Russia and Ukraine should be seen alongside the two countries – Austria and Poland – built into the respective itineraries

Within Austria, which is headed for elections this year, the far-right Freedom Party has vowed to restore Austrian neutrality in the conflict. It would, thus, be much better for Vienna to find a quick non-military solution to safeguard its own interests. This provides a meeting ground between India and Austria, underlining the significance of Modi's visit to Vienna.

Similarly, Poland that has fully supported Ukraine's fight against Russia — given how Moscow's military actions invoke old hegemonic fears — has been facing its own share of domestic challenges. The EU has encouraged Ukraine's grain, maize and oilseeds exports by removing duties in many cases, as well as arranging for 'solidarity corridors' for the consignments to pass.

What happened, however, was that the bulk of Ukrainian consignments were offloaded and sold in Polandas they were cheap without the imposition of duties. This rattled Polish farmers, who went on a massive protest, blocking roads and highways for weeks together until assurances were made that Poland will only allow transit facilities for Ukrainian agricultural shipments meant for other markets. The EU is now also taking a relook at duties and examining the possibility of a capping arrangement.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's agricultural exports are touching record levels. Prior to the war, Ukraine exported on average 5.33 mn metric tonnes a month. In February, it touched 5.2 mn metric tonnes, thus pointing to a huge comeback for one of the biggest granaries of the world. As a result, alternate political narratives are beginning to find resonance within neighbouring countries, as reflected in Polish farmers' strike.

Modi's Poland leg of his Ukraine visit was, thus, more than just a stopover for logistical purposes. It was an opportunity to explore possibilities within the third frame. Also, given the impact of the war — Poland is today home to nearly 1 mn Ukrainian refugees — and the threat of constant escalation, there's a quiet political urgency to be flexible in finding a solution.

The third dimension would require both sides to speak to each other and work out a way forward than adopt a unilateral minus Russia approach like in the Switzerland peace summit, which will only legitimate military options on either side. As the conflict grows and the fallout begins to impact on the already fragile domestic politics of many European countries, the third way may just find more purchase.

As for India, it took the call early by putting its national priorities on the table with both Russia and Ukraine. It also did so with the US and other Western powers, thus putting itself in a position to both articulate a consistent line on the war and now demonstrate the geopolitical space — Rajnath Singh was in the US while Modi was in Ukraine — across capitals to build on its intent to put the third dimension firmly on the table amid a rapidly worsening war.

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J&Ked Up for Some Election Firsts

Akshay Rout

The 2024 cycle of assembly elections is set to begin soon, with EC announcing dates for J&K (Sept 18, 25, Oct 1) and Haryana (Oct 1) polls, with results on Oct 4. In J&K, the special summary revision of electoral rolls is complete. The electorate has risen to 88.03 lakh, a significant increase of over 93,000 new voters. There is a strong consensus around J&K polls this time, and little talk about strain on human resources, disruption to development or voter fatigue, issues usually raised.

In his Independence Day address, Narendra Modi once again raised the 'one nation one election' issue. Notwithstanding this, no one will grudge the announcement of the J&K elections. The decision reflects some facts in the UT:

▶ No repoll and violence in the 12,000-odd Lok Sabha polling stations in April-May this year.

▶ EC has maintained a consistent stance on the ground situation before and after the Lok Sabha elections, including in its latest review. Security deployment, focusing on equitable allocation of personal security to candidates and political workers, is a priority.

This election will see it being the first since:

▶ GoI's 2019 decision to scrap Article 370 and bifurcate the state into two UTs: J&K and Ladakh.

▶ Delimitation of constituencies, which has resulted in additional seats and introduction of reservations for STs.

There are discussions on local communities' attitudes towards the newly created systems, as well as concerns about lingering terrorism. However, EC's leap of faith is grounded in the clear motivation shown by the people in favour of the ballot. They voted in record numbers in all five Lok Sabha constituencies, notching an aggregate of 58.58%, with women counting at 56.38%.

Turnout in the Kashmir Valley, known for voluntary or coerced abstention, rose by 30% compared to 2019.

Lal before the polls

The Koranghal polling station along LoC in Gurez assembly constituency had over 80% turnout. Seemari, India's first polling station, is also near LoC, and in the security- and logistically-challenged Kupwara district, also registered a high turnout.

More than 75% of polling stations in the UT are in rural areas, suggesting the spread of those who voted. In the updated electoral rolls, 4.27 lakh new voters aged 18-19 have been registered. With an additional 21 lakh voters in the 20-29 age group, the youth now comprise about 30% of the electorate in J&K.

Election managers in the Valley see this as a new and emphatic narrative, where action replaces apathy and belief overcomes cynicism, evident in intense campaigning and good voter turnout. The aspiration for the assembly election is clear: more voters, especially women and youth, more political campaigns, more candidates and a festive, joyous atmosphere. As CEC Rajiv Kumar puts it, the goal is to build a robust structure on a well laid foundation. While assuring adequate security, Kumar highlights that the true strength of the polls in J&K lies in the people's confidence.

The polling, planned in three phases, is the shortest in several decades. Parliamentary elections in the same geography had five phases, even as assembly polls are supposed to be more combative. EC will continue to deal with the four challenges: muscle, money, misinformation and MCC violation. Certain steps — like sanitisation of field officials to ensure integrity and impartiality, and clampdown on drugs and liquor — are underway.

All eyes will be on the Kashmir Valley this autumn. Strong participation in the electoral process would add a golden hue to the harvest season's bounty.

The writer is former DG, Election Commission

Make Those Li-ion Batteries Roar

Amitabh Kant

India's demand for lithium-ion batteries (LIB) is expected to exceed 300 GWh between 2022 and 2030. Most of this demand is met through imports from China, South Korea and Vietnam. To meet future demand, it's crucial to establish domestic LIB cell manufacturing capabilities.

Lithium-ion technology is preferred over other battery technologies because it offers fast response times and high cycle efficiency (low energy loss between charging and discharging) while remaining cost-effective. The battery value chain includes mining, raw material processing, cell component production, battery cell/pack production, battery storage, electric vehicles, and recycling and reuse. The first three stages — mining, raw material processing and cell component production — account for nearly 60% of value addition.

Chinese companies dominate the global battery market with a 60% share, followed by South Korea with 22% and Japan with 8%. CATL (Contemporary Amperex Technology Co Ltd) and BYD account for 52% of global battery cell manufacturing. India's battery import bill reached $2.1 bn in 2023, with over 85% of imports coming from China.

Scaling up and stabilising battery cell manufacturing is critical to ensuring India's energy independence and achieving its decarbonisation goals. Leading players like Tata, Reliance, Maruti Suzuki, Amara Raja, Exide, TVS Lucas, Ola Electric and JSW have announced plans totalling 100 GWh by 2030, with investments of around ₹12-15 bn.

Also, GoI is implementing a PLI scheme for 50 GWh of battery manufacturing in India.

Here's what needs to be done:

▶ **ACC PLI** GoI has launched the advanced chemistry cell (ACC) PLI scheme with an outlay of ₹18,100 cr to support 50 GWh of battery manufacturing. However, only 30 GWh has been awarded so far. There is need for a robust monitoring and implementation framework to ensure speedy on-ground execution.

New applications for batteries are rapidly emerging in heavy transport, aviation, drone tech and grid storage, requiring high-energy density and power. With various potential improvements to existing tech like lithium-ion and alternatives such as solid-state, sodium-ion, flow, aluminium-air and metal batteries in different stages of commercialisation, it's crucial to push the niche ACC programme for futuristic battery technologies.

▶ **Mineral security** Through MSP of 14 countries, India should focus on building a resilient supply chain for critical battery minerals like cobalt, nickel, lithium and the 17 rare earth' minerals essential for the battery value chain.

▶ **Processing capabilities** Minerals are refined into battery-grade chemicals and components used to make anode and cathode electrodes for battery cells. The Volta Foundation estimates that the mineral processing market will reach $62 bn by 2030. Currently, China controls 70% of global lithium refining capacity, and 85% of anode and electrolyte production. India has a unique opportunity to position itself as a reliable supplier as the global market seeks to diversify the supply chain. India should rapidly build its mineral processing capabilities to carve out a niche in the global market.

We need to get all charged up

▶ **Battery value chain and ecosystem** The battery ecosystem offers ample opportunities across upstream, midstream and downstream segments, with extensive vertical integration and economies of scale crucial. Companies like BYD and Tesla have demonstrated how vertical integration can lead to lower prices. Indian companies should lead by forming joint ventures and acquiring suppliers to secure long-term access to input materials.

▶ **Battery-swapping networks** Enabling battery-as-a-service (BaaS) through battery swapping could significantly reduce the cost of EVs, shorten charging times and boost adoption.

▶ **R&D** Universities and R&D institutes should focus on developing advanced prototypes, improving battery technology, and enhancing range and overall performance. Emphasis on R&D is critical, and the new ₹1 lakh cr scheme should be utilised to advance battery storage.

▶ **Circular economy** Repurposing EV batteries for energy storage systems (ESSs) after their end-of-life will improve the economics of second-life applications, provide low-cost commercial markets and reduce the need for new batteries in the power sector. Battery recycling units will ensure the recovery of critical minerals from end-of-life batteries and promote a circular economy by formalising the processes of battery collection, aggregation, separation, transportation and recycling.

Collaborative efforts of government, private sector and startups will be vital in driving this transformation.

The writer is India's G20 sherpa

THE SPEAKING TREE

When Life is Enlightening

K V RAGHUPATHI

We do not sit in meditation for enlightenment. It cannot be a goal. Goals operate in the material world. We set goals and strive towards their realisation. Such goals operate for our material progress and the well-being of our lives.

Just sitting is enlightenment. Seeing things as they are is enlightenment. Watching while walking is enlightenment. Thinking while eating, walking and watching, and merely doing things is not enlightenment. Practising it forcibly is unnatural. It leads to stress and conflict. Being involved makes us forget who we are.

Enlightenment is defined as losing one's sense of self. This can occur anytime and anywhere. It does not always occur in mountains and caves. The world is a real testing place for all our virtues. Any virtue that we cultivate deliberately will not last long.

If all human souls are enlightened, the notion of achieving enlightenment through practice would then be fundamentally flawed; it will only be a dream.

When we are deeply connected to nature and live according to her vagaries, it is enlightenment. When we constantly search for the beauty in imperfection and accept the natural cycle of life, it is enlightenment.

When we realise perfection is impossible and is only a myth; imperfection is not in the universe but in language, in our thought, perception, knowledge and consciousness, and accept the impermanence as the only way, it is enlightenment.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY Paragraphs From Fiction

The Man in the High Castle

Philip K Dick

Paul said, 'I have for several days now inspected it, and for no logical reason I feel *a certain emotional fondness*. Why is that? I may ask. I do not even now project into this blob, as in psychological German tests, my own psyche. I still see no shapes or forms. But it somehow partakes of Tao. You see?'

He motioned Childan over. It is balanced. The forces within this piece are stabilised. At rest. So to speak. This object had made its peace with the universe. It has separated from it and hence has managed to come to homeostasis.... 'It does not have *wabi*,' Paul said, 'nor could it ever. But —' He touched the pin with his nail. 'Robert, this object has *wu*'...

'...To have no historicity, and also no artistic, aesthetic worth, and yet to partake of some ethereal value — that is a marvel. Just precisely because this is a miserable, small, worthless-looking blob; that, Robert, contributes to its possessing *wu*. For it is a fact that *wu* is customarily found in least imposing places, as in the Christian aphorism, 'stones rejected by the builder'..

Chat Room

When Mpox Goes Viral

Apropos the Edit, 'Better Be Prepared Against the Pox' (Aug 26), mpox is emerging as a serious global concern after surging cases in the African region and it spreading to other parts of the world. Mpox cases were recently detected in remote Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Keeping in mind the Covid pandemic, there is a need to remain concerned and alert about new viral threats. Kerala's handling of the first phase of Covid to its containment of the Nipah and Zika viruses last year with a timely and effective response to its public health challenge set an example. GoI should take preventive steps such as tamping up contact tracing, enhancing surveillance and improving vaccine to help contain and tackle the mpox virus.

K S RAO
Thane

Opinion

TUESDAY, AUGUST 27, 2024

BHARAT'S BIO ECONOMY

Union minister Jitendra Singh

India's bio economy has experienced remarkable growth, skyrocketing from $10 billion in 2014 to over $130 billion in 2024, with projections to reach $300 billion by 2030. This surge reflects India's robust economic growth

Play by the rule book

The tighter regulation for P2P platforms was needed as innovation is fine only if it's within the rules

THE RESERVE BANK of India's (RBI) decision to tighten regulations for transactions on non-banking financial company peer-to-peer (NBFC-P2P) lending platforms was needed as all platforms have not been following the rule book. For instance, the existing rules already barred an NBFC-P2P from providing or arranging any credit enhancement or credit guarantee for a customer. Propping up sub-standard credit profiles is dangerous and can disrupt the system. Lenders are vulnerable to a default by the borrower especially if the guarantees are not honoured. While NBFC-P2P platforms do make it easier for a section of borrowers to get a loan, which they might not be able to access from a bank or an NBFC, the lenders have the right to know the correct level of creditworthiness of the borrowers. It's possible that business may slow down for some players that were offering credit enhancements. But a clean-up was needed.

The RBI has also made it clear that an NBFC-P2P platform should not, on any count, assume a "credit risk" for the transactions that take place on the platform. In other words, only the lender — a regulated entity — must bear any loss arising out a default by a borrower on the repayment of the principal or the interest. This will force lenders to do more due diligence and assess creditworthiness carefully before they write out a cheque. Again, those platforms that were picking up the tab for any defaults could lose business but risks need to be reined in.

According to the rules rolled out in 2017, the RBI had asked NBFC-P2P platforms to not cross-sell any products except for loan-specific insurance. However, it appears the loans were being pushed by some platforms as an investment product with features such as tenure-linked assured minimum returns and liquidity options. The regulator has explicitly banned loans being sold by one lender to another. The regulator has also streamlined the timelines for fund transfers from escrow accounts. From mid-November, lenders' funds awaiting transfer to a borrower, in an escrow account, should not remain there for more than T+1 day. Similarly, money collected from borrowers should not be left lying in an escrow account for more than T+1. While some players have complained the timeline is too short, in these days of electronic banking, a day is enough. Moreover, the RBI has made it clear funds in escrow accounts must be used solely for the purpose that they are parked there. In fact, a platform cannot use the funds of lender A for transactions of lender B. This will ensure that payments to borrowers and repayments to lenders are not delayed.

While the cap of ₹50 lakh for total lending by individuals across all P2P platforms has been retained at ₹50 lakh, the language of the provision has been amended to bring the rules in line with the RBI's digital lending guidelines. To be sure, keeping track of lenders, the amounts they are lending across platforms, and also their net worth, is not going to be easy. Some mechanism needs to be put in place to facilitate this. In the near term, the volume of transactions could slow especially because lenders can't ease their cash flows by "selling" the loans. It is creditable that these platforms have helped millions who find them easier to borrow from than from banks and NBFCs. But innovation is more than welcome only if they are within the rules.

Sorry, Elon, but businesses rely on regulation

TYLER COWEN

Bloomberg

ELON MUSK HAS hinted that he would take a job in a Trump administration, posting on X that he would be "willing to serve" in the "Department of Government Efficiency". Unfortunately, even Musk — who fired about 80% of the staff of then-Twitter after buying it, yet has managed to keep the service functional, even vital — would find it very hard to clear away unnecessary regulation and bureaucracy.

Consider the relatively straightforward idea, popular in some Republican circles, of firing large numbers of federal bureaucrats. There would be immediate objections, not only from the employees themselves but also from US businesses.

Businesses need to make plans, and they frequently consult with regulatory agencies as to what might be permissible. The Food and Drug Administration needs to approve new drug offerings. The Federal Aviation Administration needs to approve new airline routes. The Federal Communications Commission needs to approve new versions of mobile phones. The Federal Trade Commission and Department of Justice need to give green lights for significant mergers. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. needs to approve plans for winding down failed banks. And so on.

If those and other agencies were stripped of their staffs, a lot of US businesses would be paralysed. You might argue that this fact is itself proof that there is too much regulation, but the fact remains. Shutting down a large chunk of the federal regulatory apparatus would make it harder, not easier, for the private sector. Furthermore, regulation would give way to litigation, and the judiciary is not obviously more efficient than the bureaucracy.

There is a precedent for elimination of an entire agency, but it is limited in applicability. It took more than six years, but in 1985 the federal government abolished the Civil Aeronautics Board as part of a larger law that deregulated the airline industry. The result was lower fares, more competition, and improved airline safety. In the absence of the CAB, there was still enough of a coherent legal permission structure to allow the airlines to keep flying.

A similar tactic might work today with the Department of Education. Of course there would be opposition, but the department could be abolished with a minimum of disruption. The same would not be the case, for example, with the Department of Energy: Someone needs to oversee the maintenance of the nation's nuclear weapons, as the DOE currently does.

Another approach would be to examine agency regulations on an individual basis, discarding any that are outdated or counterproductive. I'm all for that, but it involves a lot of process and delay. The number of regulations is growing all the time, as for instance a year's worth of the Federal Register might run to 60,000 to 90,000 pages. A review could slow the growth of regulation, but it would probably not reverse it.

The basic paradox is this: Government regulations are embedded in a large, unwieldy, and complex set of institutions. Dismantling it, or paring it back significantly, would require a lot of state capacity — that is, state competence. Yet deregulators are suspicious of greater state capacity, as it carries the potential for more state regulatory action. Think of it this way: If someone told a libertarian-leaning government efficiency expert that, in order to pare back the state, it first must be granted more power, he would probably run away screaming.

My favorite deregulatory tactic, and one which is relatively effective, is simply to be slow to regulate new sectors of the economy. Thanks to economic growth and innovation, there will always some important yet less regulated sectors of the economy. Those particular forbearances won't last forever, but over time, other new and less regulated sectors will arise to take their place. This phenomenon is currently playing out with the development of AI.

In the early stages of a new sector, there might appear to be insufficient government regulation. But this less regulated period can be especially useful for sorting out exactly how these sectors will (and will not) work and contribute to the overall economy. Much as it pains me to admit, a lot of regulation is irreversible. So looking for partial victories, and preventing or delaying new regulation, is the way to go. Anyone hoping to deregulate needs to understand that.

TECHPROOF EXPRESS

THE NEED OF THE HOUR FOR MANY FIRMS IS A DATA PURGE, NOT MORE DATA SCIENCE OR GEN AI

Dealing with a data deluge

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist

By invitation

IN 2016, I WROTE in another publication where I also have a regular space that the internet was facing "data inundation". Firms, too, are awash with data on their own operations and plow through it incessantly to find information that will allow them to 'transform' their operations — in a never-ending attempt to get more by spending less. This relentless pursuit, akin to dogs chasing their own tails, is not only entertaining but also a stark reminder of the inefficiency of our current data management approach.

We see the same cycle today with generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). The amount of data available on the internet has grown exponentially, and most of it is rubbish — especially for a corporation trying to focus on a specific problem that is germane only to its own company. No amount of generative AI-produced images, prose, or poetry is specific to their situation, and they are therefore stuck without the ability to build a business case on how to use GenAI within their firms.

I am not gainsaying the need for big data analytics or focused AI solutions to deal with specific corporate issues. However, the explosion of digital data in the wake of the Internet boom has caused a justifiable fear of "data inundation". And a series of Noahs have sprung up to build arks to keep companies afloat during the data deluge. They peddle ever-larger database storage software and machines to handle this data flood. We now even have the concept of "data lakes" instead of databases, referring to "cold" data which is not required for immediate data modelling purposes but can presumably be called upon someday to increase the efficiency of AI learning algorithms.

Speaking of Noah's arks, the serendipitously named investment advisory outfit Ark Invest cites that in 2006, the internet produced about 0.16 zettabytes of data while the available storage capacity was only 0.09 zettabytes — already indicating a capacity deficit of 1.7. This data then increased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 25% for the next decade, causing a shortage of 500% in storage space. Fast forward to now when a current prediction from Aston University says, "The next three years will be crucial. The global datasphere is predicted to increase to 175 zettabytes, with one zettabyte being approximately equal to one billion terabytes." A terabyte is 1,000 gigabytes (GB). Figure the math.

> The amount of data available on the internet has grown exponentially, and most of it is rubbish for generative AI companies

Companies then add an "analytics" team to try to make sense of all this data. These teams usually have one or two expert statisticians or "data scientists" and a bunch of young, eager offshore number crunchers who are willing to pore through reams of data like gaunt prospectors panning for gold. This data surplus has spawned an entire genre of AI analytics firms. The problem they blithely ignore is that they are often sifting through a load of junk in the first place, and even more junk falls upon this load every day at the Internet's warp speed.

Purveyors of AI are quick to point out that they cleanse the data before working on manipulating it so that they can make sense of it. But as Ark Invest says, there's just too much of this data floating around and what's more, some of it has been kept alive on company servers for many years without ever being looked at. The problem isn't that the data is dirty — it's old. And data ages alarmingly quickly.

Addressing data storage shortage by building new mega data centres worldwide is not the solution, and it's not a sustainable approach. Apart from the high costs, their massive energy consumption has been well documented, as well as statements from generative AI players like Google and Microsoft that they are nowhere near reaching their net zero targets for carbon any time in the next several years, after having first loudly predicted that they would be able to! It's a hefty price to pay.

My late mother, a successful doctor, managed the house with the same precision with which she handled her surgeries and obstetric procedures. When she got down to spring cleaning the house, she threw out everything that hadn't been used for a year. It didn't matter if it was still unused and in its original packaging; if it hadn't been used for a year out it went, despite howls of protest from the rest of us.

Well, it seems as if someone was listening. Around the time I wrote the said article in 2016, MySpace, the first large-scale social network, deleted every photo, video, and audio file uploaded to it before 2016, seemingly inadvertently. Entire tranches of Usenet newsgroups, home to some of the internet's earliest conversations, have gone offline forever and vanished from history. The problem for many users (or hoarders, depending on your perspective) is that data they consider invaluable may also have been purged.

The real need of the hour for many firms is a data purge, not more data science or GenAI. What I am suggesting does need corporate courage: instead of spending huge sums on buying or renting more space to store data and then more money on generative AI to find even more ways to analyse fast-decaying data, some of the money may be better spent on having a smart set of young people offshore trained exclusively to look for anything that is too old to be used or was "dead on arrival", and having that data purged. This might limit the growth of useless computing and storage capability to some extent, leading instead to the use of more relevant and real-time data from which the conclusions reached by data analytics can be readily acted upon.

India Inc. betting on unlocking value

SHRIRAM SUBRAMANIAN

Founder and MD, InGovern Research Services

India's recent wave of demergers will be closely watched, as these companies seek to maximise value and drive growth through more focused and efficient operations

IN FY25, SEVERAL INDIAN companies have announced demergers, aiming to create value by breaking up into focused, independent entities. Examples include Raymond, Vedanta, Quess Corp, and Jio Financial, while companies such as Sanofi, Siemens, ITC, and Bombay Dyeing are following suit. The rationale behind these moves is clear: by separating unrelated business units, companies can streamline operations, improve management focus, optimise capital allocation, and unlock shareholder value. Demergers allow each entity to pursue niche growth strategies and respond more effectively to their respective markets.

Rationale for demergers

The core motivation for demerging is to unlock the growth potential of each business by granting them autonomy.

Raymond, for instance, is separating its lifestyle and real estate businesses, offering investors a clearer view of each segment's performance and potential. After the demerger, Raymond will focus solely on its engineering business. Meanwhile, the lifestyle arm, with its global apparel presence, offers investors a chance to back a specialised player in a growing market.

Similarly, Vedanta's decision to split into six companies, housing its aluminium, base metals, and other commodity businesses, aims to better manage the individual commodity cycles. By focusing on specific sectors, Vedanta can optimise capital allocation and operations for each company.

Focused management and operational efficiency

One of the key benefits of demergers is the ability to create more focused management structures. Conglomerates often suffer from a lack of clarity in strategic decision-making because of competing priorities across business units. When these businesses operate as standalone entities, management can focus exclusively on the needs and challenges of that sector, leading to improved operational efficiency.

In global cases, General Electric's break-up allowed its aviation, healthcare, and power businesses to focus on their respective markets. Similarly, United Technologies' demerger into Carrier (refrigeration) and Otis (elevators) allowed for more streamlined operations and clearer strategies.

Better capital allocation

In a conglomerate structure, capital allocation can often be a balancing act between competing units, each with different needs. Demergers allow each business to independently raise capital, optimise debt, and allocate resources to its specific needs. This leads to more efficient capital deployment, as sector-specific businesses can make targeted investments that better align with their growth strategies. For example, a standalone aluminium business may have different capital needs than a base metals business, and being part of the same conglomerate may dilute investment in both. By separating, each entity can attract capital aligned with its own growth opportunities.

> The core motivation for demerging is to unlock the growth potential of each business by granting them autonomy

In the case of ITC, hotel would be more capital-intensive than a fast-moving consumer goods business. In Vedanta, the aluminium business can now pursue strategies tailored to the cyclical market, while the base metals businesses can focus on their own supply-demand dynamics. Similarly, Raymond's real estate unit can take on more project-level debt and have its own capital allocation strategies independently of the lifestyle business.

Unlocking shareholder value

One of the main reasons why companies demerge is to unlock shareholder value. Conglomerates are often undervalued because investors apply a "conglomerate discount", reflecting the complexity and perceived inefficiencies of managing unrelated businesses under one roof. By splitting into more focused entities, companies can often achieve higher market valuations.

Investors can value each demerged company based on its specific performance and prospects rather than applying a blanket valuation to the conglomerate. This approach often leads to higher aggregate valuations for the individual businesses than the combined entity would have achieved. For example, when General Electric broke up into separate companies, the market responded positively, recognising the increased transparency and focus of each business. Similarly, the break-up of United Technologies allowed investors to value Carrier and Otis separately, leading to higher valuations for both entities.

In India, Raymond's demerger offers investors a clearer view of its lifestyle and real estate businesses, potentially unlocking value that was previously obscured. Vedanta's break-up is likely to attract investors interested in specific commodities, leading to higher valuations for each segment.

Attracting sector-specific investors

Demergers can also help attract a broader range of investors. In India, the rise of theme-based funds and the growing interest in mid- and small-cap stocks make demerged entities more attractive. Investors often prefer to invest in companies with clear and focused business models, making demerged entities appealing.

For instance, Raymond's lifestyle business may attract investors interested in apparel while its real estate unit may appeal to those focused on property development. By providing clarity in their investment propositions demerged firms can attract more specialised investors, which can boost stock performance.

Moreover, smaller, more focused companies tend to be more transparent, which can further boost investor confidence. By reducing complexity, demergers allow investors to better understand the risks and opportunities in each business, leading to more informed investment decisions.

Demergers offer numerous benefits to companies and investors alike. By simplifying corporate structures, improving management focus, and optimising capital allocation, demergers can unlock shareholder value and attract a broader range of investors. India's recent wave of demergers will be closely watched, as these companies seek to maximise value and drive growth through more focused and efficient operations. As the market continues to evolve, the success of these demergers will provide valuable insights into how companies can best leverage this strategy to create long-term value for shareholders.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A new vote bank

Apropos of "Funding retrial benefits" (*FE*, August 26), the National Democratic Alliance government's new Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) is virtually akin to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), and assures government employees 50% of their last drawn pay as a lifelong monthly benefit. The UPS also assures a periodic dearness relief hike in line with inflation trends, a family pension equivalent to 60% of a worker's pension in the case of their demise, and a lump-sum superannuation payout in addition to gratuity benefits at the time of retirement. Also, a minimum monthly pension of ₹10,000 has been promised for those who complete at least 10 years of central government service. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is targeting political gains from government employees by offering a UPS countering the Congress's promise of a return to the unfunded OPS, as this move comes ahead of key assembly polls. Government cadres have traditionally been a solid vote bank for the BJP, especially in Delhi, where elections are imminent in February.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Easing credit flow

The US Federal Reserve has signalled for a rate cut in September, and it is expected that borrowing costs will be trimmed, and other central banks will follow suit. The Fed's actions will echo as other central banks will react by cutting or hiking rates, as is suitable for their economies. The mood of global central banks is generally upbeat for a rate cut since inflation is under the carpet and bankers have to satiate the credit need of borrowers by easing the flow of bank finance.

—NK Nagararajan, Sivakasi

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The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[OUR TAKE]

West must rein in Israel now

Its war-mongering, even as allies push for ceasefire, doesn't bode well for West Asia

Israel's "pre-emptive" strikes on the Hezbollah in Lebanon over the weekend and the latter's retaliation were both short-lived affairs, and, fortunately, without any apparent civilian casualties. But the Israeli attack without any immediate provocation, even as West and Arab world-mediated ceasefire and hostage release talks with Hamas were on, underscores a rather alarming likelihood: that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu doesn't relish peace prospects, given that his political prospects hinge on the support of the extreme Right-wing in his country. This keeps him tied to his pursuit of a "total victory" in Gaza, a senseless goal by any reckoning. He has more incentive to stay in power, given the corruption charges that dog him and the investigations pending.

The ceasefire talks in Cairo failed on Sunday even though western allies of Israel, especially the US, remained hopeful that these would continue over the coming days. The latest attacks, however, have ensured that the already sputtering negotiations face an even steeper uphill path. The attacks have not gone down well with the US and other allies of Israel, and maybe it is time for them to pull support for Netanyahu's war, decisively and materially.

The Joe Biden administration in the US stepped up naval presence in the region to deter Iran from its promised "direct response" to Israel assassinating then Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran last month, where he was present as a State guest for the swearing-in of new Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian. But at the same time, it has been keen on mediating a sustained ceasefire plan, given its political considerations in the election season.

By avoiding civilian casualties in this round of fighting, both Netanyahu and Iran's clerical regime (which backs the Hezbollah in Lebanon) are playing to their respective war-mongering galleries at a time when no one, including many within the Israeli establishment, wants the war to continue, let alone widen. Over 40,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel in Gaza, and 1,200 Israelis were killed by Hamas on October 7, 2023. If this humanitarian crisis was not enough, Gaza is fast becoming a political displacement and occupation crisis with land grab by the Israelis. So, unless the West reins in Netanyahu — the time for mere pressure is long past — the region and, by extension, the world will be held hostage indefinitely.

Women's safety needs faster State response

The nationwide tumult over the issue of women's safety has underlined the less-than-satisfactory response of state authorities in dealing with crimes and patterns of behaviour that clearly fall afoul of the law but continue because of apathy. Three prominent recent cases — the Kolkata rape and murder of a doctor, the rape of two minor schoolgirls in Maharashtra's Badlapur, and the damning disclosures made by the Justice Hema committee on the underbelly of the Malayalam film industry — have shown just how callously authorities typically respond when it comes to systemic questions involving women's safety. In the first case, the state government failed to dispel the perception that key people allegedly involved in the crime had the protection and patronage of the authorities. In the second case, the police appeared to have taken it easy when the first complaint of sexual abuse was made and filed the FIR after four days. In the third case, a pernicious nexus between powerful men in the Malayalam film industry grew unchecked, resulting in the sexual, physical and mental exploitation of women artistes and professionals. In all three cases, the law to safeguard the safety of women was present, but the administrative will to implement it strictly was not.

This cannot stand. No conversation on women's safety can afford to ignore the role of the police and the administration (or the lack of it). The response by the three state governments — spanning the political divide — show that authorities only acted when their hand was forced by mounting outrage and protests. In Kerala, for example, the Hema committee found that almost every woman professional in the industry knew about the patterns of abuse but was scared to speak out, indicating that the government had failed to create an enabling atmosphere for victims to speak out. Changing the scenario for women's safety will need systems that are responsive and empathetic towards victims, and states have to take the lead in creating them.

Solidarity as bedrock for women's safety

A collective demand for a just and secure society can jolt governments that tolerate their employees' misdeeds into cracking down on crimes against women

Partha P Majumder

The masses are not rehearsing for an uprising; they are already in one. The spontaneity, volume, and expanse of participation visible this time have not been witnessed in many years. They are demanding justice.

The sad incident of rape and murder of a doctor on duty in the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata, on the night of August 9 triggered this uprising. The incident has convulsed the entire nation. India's head is bowed in shame. The surgeon and physician after whom the hospital and medical college is named, Dr RG Kar, also fought for social reform centred on women's issues. He must be turning in his grave. Citizens thronged the streets spontaneously and started to march, condemning the crime and demanding safety and security for doctors on duty and women in society. Streets not just in Kolkata, but across the nation saw such marches. And as the news spread, so did streets in distant parts of the world. Just over the weekend, on August 24, scientists, research scholars, and students marched on the streets of Kolkata demanding justice: "We march together today for a safer society tomorrow." The gruesome crime has hit the psyche of the entire nation. The solidarity expressed is beyond imagination. Citizens have realised that collective security relies on solidarity. Indeed, one poster in the August 24 march read, "Raise your voice or you are next".

The Indian Medical Association, in a memorandum submitted to the Union health minister, stated, "Doctors in this country have been suffering for the past few decades due to the violence unleashed on them. Pedestrian working conditions, inhuman workloads, and violence in the workplace are a reality." And when there is violence in the workplace, the police are usually evasive, as in the present case. The Supreme Court, on August 22, termed the Kolkata Police's delay in registering the death of the woman doctor as "extremely disturbing". "How was it that the post-mortem was conducted at 6.10 pm on August 9 and yet the unnatural death information was sent to the police station at 11.30 pm?" The Chief Justice of India asked, in view of the delay in filing the FIR. "The principal of the college should have come straight to the college and filed the FIR. Whom is he protecting?" The government, for its part, took steps to protect the former principal of the college, who held this office when the crime occurred. Instead of forcing him to go on leave so that the investigations into the crime could proceed without prejudice, the government transferred him to the head of another medical college in Kolkata.

The order was withdrawn after intense public pressure. Many instances of corruption and maladministration by the principal have since been revealed and are now being investigated. There are strong reasons to believe that governments often know the nature and extent of the misdeeds of many of their employees at the helm of various affairs but, for reasons that we can well speculate on, such people are not pulled up and are instead allowed to continue with their nefarious activities.

The lackeys of such persons also get protection and gain the power to engage in various anti-social activities. The result of all this is the degradation of the moral fabric of society. The degradation is obvious not just in West Bengal but also at the pan-India level. It, however, appears that the mass uprising that has taken place in West Bengal will soon be hijacked and given a political colour. Some political parties have started an agitation demanding the resignation of the chief minister of West Bengal over this incident instead of demanding a just and secure society and making a collective effort to ensure that. Isn't it a shame that India ranks 128th out of 177 countries for women's inclusion, justice, and security, as per one index? Every year, our country registers high rates of violence against women. Over 31,000 rapes were reported in 2022, but the actual rate is likely much higher, as many women do not report such crimes due to fear of reprisal and stigma. Isn't it a shame that among the rape cases that go to trial in India, only about 25% see convictions?

As the Indian Medical Association stated in its memo to the health minister, "The murder of this young lady (doctor) is not the first, neither it would be the last if corrective measures are not taken." Doctors affiliated with the British Medical Association, said, "We stand in solidarity with doctors in Kolkata and across India at this upsetting time, and support their call over urgent measures to improve the safety of female doctors in the workplace, including providing secure and private spaces for doctors to use while on shift."

"Our state, our country and the whole world are asking for justice for our daughter," the victim's father said. As a poster in the August 24 march for justice read, "She wanted to treat humans who are ill. She wasn't aware that our society is ill, that our society needs treatment first."

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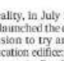
The views expressed are personal

Following the rape and murder in the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, citizens thronged the streets, condemning the crime and demanding safety and security for doctors on duty and women in general PTI

Making India truly NIPUN needs more ammunition



Anjuli Bhargava

Like with many other things, the Covid pandemic dealt a severe blow to students' learning nationally. Children's basic reading ability dropped to pre-2012 levels, reversing the slow improvement achieved in the intervening years. Drops were visible in both government and private schools in most states and for both boys and girls. Nationally, children's basic arithmetic levels, too, declined over 2018 levels for most grades, although the decline is less steep and the picture is more varied than in the case of basic reading.

Faced with this reality, in July 2021, the government of India launched the country's most ambitious mission to try and fix its crumbling public education edifice: National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat. The idea behind this mission is simple: Children must first learn to read before they read to learn, and some basic arithmetic skills are necessary for survival. At the time of the launch, I was horrified to learn that on a countrywide basis, 50 million children had been left behind the curve! The mission was initially to be completed by 2025, but the deadline has been extended by a year, to 2026-27.

Experts in the sector say that the Centre has done a fair bit to lay the groundwork for adoption (interested readers can take a look at tinyurl.com/mr3hbfvx), and the ball now lies firmly in the states' courts. Interestingly, states such as Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh are doing better on this front, as they launched their initiatives even before NIPUN Bharat came to be, with the support of NGOs and civil society organisations such as Central Square Foundation, Pratham, Education Alliance, and Peepul.

In June, the first results post-launch of the mission from one of the early mover states, Madhya Pradesh, became publicly available. Data from the state shows that over 39% of Grade 3 students from over 4,500 schools have reached NIPUN standards in oral reading and fluency and are proficient in reading more than 45 words per minute. Over 22% of Grade 3 students are proficient in identifying numbers and performing two-digit subtraction. The numbers dip a bit for Grade 2 at 27% and 11%, respectively.

The competency in word reading increased from 18% to 34% over two years, indicating a growing ability among students to recognise and read words accurately. Sentence reading proficiency also saw a substantial rise, with 42% of students now able to read all three assessed sentences, up from 30% in 2022. Furthermore, oral reading fluency (ORF) improved from 17% to 23%. Competency in recognising two-digit numbers (up to 99) increased from 35% to 47%. The most dramatic rise was in the ability to subtract single digits without carryover (up to 20) from 18% to 65%, reflecting significant progress in basic subtraction skills. Perhaps the biggest leap was in competency in adding two-digit numbers without carryover (up to 20), surging from 25% to 75%. I'm not sure what readers think of this, but it certainly makes one wonder what the state was doing all these 75-odd years since Independence in the primary education arena!

JUST LIKE AN ELEMENT OF COMPETITIVENESS HAS CREPT IN AMONG THE STATES OVER SWACHH BHARAT OUTCOMES, SO SHOULD HAPPEN IN THE CASE OF NIPUN

Even as Madhya Pradesh celebrates its small success, there are a few things that the Centre could do to ensure states take up this mission with the seriousness it deserves. To begin with, the mission needs to be extended by at least another 10 years, as expecting universal or even 90% foundational literacy in five or six years is highly unrealistic.

Second, the extra financial support the Centre is providing for the mission needs to be extended for many years, probably well beyond the mission. As things stand, the Centre has set aside and is offering the states a budget of around ₹2,500 crore a year over and above the usual yearly support for school education. Almost 75% of this amount is being used for improved learning and teaching material for students. Studies have shown that often, underprivileged students make do with just a single dull textbook and lack the availability of storybooks, workbooks or any additional material that might make their learning more comprehensive and interesting. While this is a great step, it needs to continue well beyond the mission since the states' own education budgets mostly go into paying teacher's salaries.

Then, just like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), a similar awareness-building exercise can give a fillip to this mission. While there is awareness among those vested in the education field, parents, and other stakeholders are yet to grasp what is being attempted. At a countrywide level, parents, in fact, tend to be more lax about their ward's education — even allowing them to skip a grade or not attend school at the drop of a hat for family celebrations or exigencies — in the early years, whereas all research shows that this is the time they need to be most vigilant. In many cases, parents not being literate themselves doesn't help matters. Just like an element of competitiveness has crept in among the states over the SBA, so should happen in the case of NIPUN. Monitor how different states are performing, incentivise them to perform, and beat each other in this game.

And lastly, a controversial but a fairly critical aspect is that some kind of standardisation might be necessary in teaching. Teachers globally and in India resist scripted teaching plans, seeking flexibility and innovativeness. But clearly, in a country as vast and diverse as ours and where the quality of teachers is as varied as it gets, innovativeness has not taken us very far. The learning outcomes data attest to this. The Bridge International Academy (tinyurl.com/yvhnf3nr) type of approach — which has been successful in Kenya and has been adopted by Nigeria, Uganda, and even in a small way in the state of Andhra Pradesh — might be unpopular among the teaching community but unavoidable for a country like ours.

Anjuli Bhargava is a senior journalist who writes on governance, infrastructure and the social sector.
The views expressed are personal

[SHAKTIKANTA DAS | RBI GOVERNOR

There should be careful adoption of AI in critical decision-making segments, such as loan sanctioning. Ethical AI governance is essential to ensure fairness

HT

UPS serves fiscal stability, and retirees' interests

Hitesh Jain

The just announced Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) is designed to integrate the disparate pension systems in the country. It is a testament to Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's unwavering commitment to reform, ensuring long-term fiscal prudence while protecting the interests of retirees across the nation.

The burdens of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) were universally acknowledged as unsustainable, a debt trap that threatened to undermine the financial stability of the country. It led to growing pension liabilities, consuming an increasing share of government revenues, and posed a long-term risk to the fiscal health of the nation.

In response, the National Pension System (NPS) was introduced by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government in 2004, marking a shift to a defined-contribution model where both employees and the government contributed 10% of the employee's basic pay plus dearness allowance (DA) into a retirement fund. This fund was invested in a mix of market-linked instruments, and the returns determined the pension amount. Although this system brought much-needed fiscal discipline and reduced the government's unfunded pension liabilities, it also introduced uncertainty for retirees, as the pension was dependent on market performance. For instance, during market downturns, retirees saw lower returns, raising concerns about their financial security.

The NPS did not escape the clutches of political manipulation, particularly by the Congress. Initially, the Congress lauded the NPS as a necessary and prudent measure, with former PM Manmohan Singh endorsing the shift towards a more sustainable pension model. Yet, when the winds of political expediency blew in a different direction, the Congress abandoned its principles. This inconsistency in policy stance severely damaged the credibility of the NPS.

Against this backdrop, the UPS addresses the critical issues of both the OPS and NPS while ensuring long-term economic stability. Under the UPS, retirees will receive a pension equivalent to 50% of their last drawn salary plus DA, similar to the OPS. However, unlike the OPS, the UPS incorporates elements of the NPS by requiring employees to contribute 10% of their basic pay plus DA towards their pension fund, ensuring a balanced sharing of the financial burden.

The UPS also introduces an innovative feature where retirees receive a lump-sum payment equivalent to one-tenth of their monthly emoluments for every six months of completed service. This not only provides immediate financial relief but also offers flexibility, something the OPS lacked. Additionally, the UPS includes provisions for inflation indexation, ensuring that pensions increase in line with DA revisions, thus protecting retirees from the erosive effects of inflation — an improvement over the NPS, which did not offer such protection.

The UPS introduces a minimum pension guarantee of ₹10,000 per month, ensuring that all retirees, irrespective of their service duration, receive a dignified pension. This addresses the concerns raised under the NPS, where the lack of a minimum pension left many retirees with inadequate financial support. For example, a government employee who retires after ten years of service will now receive at least ₹10,000 per month, safeguarding them from financial insecurity. In case of death during service, the family pension under UPS is fixed at 30% of the pension amount, providing adequate support to the deceased employee's family. This contrasts with the NPS, where family pension calculations were more complex and often less generous.

The introduction of the UPS is rooted in a deep understanding of India's economic landscape and the challenges that lie ahead. PM Modi's leadership in steering this policy is a testament to his commitment to long-term reforms over short-term populism. One cannot help but admire the courage and foresight involved in crafting a policy like the UPS. It is a move that transcends political expediency, focusing instead on building a sustainable future for the nation. The UPS exemplifies the present dispensation's broader intent to transform India's financial and social security landscape and ensure that it is both inclusive and resilient. It is a manifestation of visionary leadership that looks beyond immediate gains to secure a prosperous future for all citizens. It is a scheme that unifies the best elements of past pension systems while addressing their flaws, ensuring that India's retirees can live with dignity and financial security.

As we move forward, it is crucial for all stakeholders to support this initiative, recognising that the UPS is a well-calibrated response to the challenges posed by both the OPS and the NPS. The UPS is more than a pension scheme — it is confident stride towards a unified and secure future for India. This is a decision that will be remembered as one of the most transformative in India's journey towards becoming a developed nation.

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The views expressed are personal

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No more delays

Caste enumeration should not hold the Census from being undertaken quickly

In what can only be a case of muddying the waters, the Union government is reportedly mulling the expansion of data collection in the long-delayed Census to include caste enumeration. That caste may be one of the variables in the Census could be an outcome of the strident demand for a caste census by several political parties. But considering the incomplete and poorly constructed nature of the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011, which resulted in data that were unwieldy, inaccurate, and hence unusable, the government must not hurry into utilising the office of the Registrar General and other agencies to tabulate caste. There must first be a definite time frame to conduct the Census on a war footing. If the delay is deliberate, in order to allow for delimitation to be conducted first in 2026, this will be harmful not just to public policy but also to relations with States. As of June 2024, out of 233 countries, India was one of 44 not to have conducted the Census this decade. The ostensible reason provided by the Union Home Ministry was delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but 143 other countries conducted the Census after March 2020, which marked the onset of the pandemic. India shares this dubious distinction of not having a Census with countries affected by conflict, economic crises or turmoil such as Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine, Sri Lanka and in sub-Saharan Africa.

There remains little excuse to continually delay the decennial Census, an exercise that has been conducted without fail from 1881 to 2011. Yet, the deadline to freeze administrative boundaries of districts, *tehsils*, towns and municipal bodies – a prerequisite before the conduct of the Census – lapsed on June 30 this year. This deadline has been extended 10 times since 2019. Several public schemes such as the National Food Security Act, the National Social Assistance Programme and the delimitation of constituencies are dependent upon the Census being conducted. Besides, statistical surveys that go into setting policy such as those related to household and social consumption, the National Family Health Survey, the Periodic Labour Force Survey, and the Sample Registration System, among others, use the Census to set their sampling frames. With the 2011 Census data getting increasingly out-dated and phenomena such as migration across and within States, the urbanisation of Indian societies, and the suburbanisation of cities becoming increasingly prominent in recent years, the lack of a Census is telling. The reliance on a bevy of sample surveys to fill in the gap is only resulting in debates over methodology and conclusions based on cherry-picking according to one's political choice. Clearly, the Union government must stop being derelict in its duties and should proceed with the Census quickly.

Unending war

Escalatory risks in West Asia will remain without a ceasefire in Gaza

Israel's "pre-emptive" strike on Lebanon on August 25 and Hezbollah's rocket and drone attacks on Israel underline the complexities and escalatory risks of the raging multi-party war in West Asia since October 2023. While the main theatre is Gaza, which Israel has been mercilessly pounding since the October 7 Hamas attack, the conflict has effectively spread to Israel's northern border and southern Lebanon. Over the past 10 months, Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Lebanese Shia militia, has launched hundreds of rocket attacks towards Israel, "in solidarity with the Palestinians". Israel has responded with air strikes on Lebanon, killing Hezbollah operatives and civilians. The trigger for the latest flare-up was the Israeli killing of Fuad Shukr, a senior commander of Hezbollah, in a strike in Beirut on July 31 – the day Israel killed Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. On August 25, after striking hundreds of Hezbollah targets, Israel said the Shia group was planning to carry out a large-scale attack and that its assault was defensive. But the massive strike did not deter Hezbollah from launching over 300 katyusha rockets and drones towards Israel, killing at least one soldier and wounding several.

After Sunday's pre-dawn bombardments, both sides have signalled a de-escalation. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah says his group achieved its targets, while Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said his country does not want a regional war. Yet, neither side is ready to back off from escalatory cycles. It is clear that Israel is not in a hurry to wrap up its devastating offensive in Gaza, which has killed over 40,000 Palestinians. The U.S. supports and mediates a ceasefire, but backs Israel's war efforts through defence supplies and diplomatic protection. Hezbollah says it will not stop attacking Israel as long as the Gaza war continues. By bombing Hezbollah and taking down its commanders, Israel is trying to change the reality on the ground, but Hezbollah's continued attacks, which have turned northern Israel into a depopulated furling zone, suggest this approach is not very successful. When Israel began attacking Hamas, it vowed to dismantle the group. Today, even the Israeli Defense Forces doubt whether it can be destroyed. While the war on Hamas still continues, the conflict with Hezbollah is escalating. By destroying Hamas, Israel wanted to strengthen its security in the south, but the widening war has heightened its insecurity in the north. And Israel does not have any easy military solution for Hezbollah. As long as the war in Gaza continues, the path towards a wider regional war will remain open.

The case of the brutal attack on and the murder of a woman doctor in Kolkata has highlighted the range of aggressive behaviours and violence that women face. These five articles, on the Editorial/Opinion pages, look at the issues of safety and spaces for women, and the adequacy of societal responses and the justice system

The heavy shackles of fear and vigilance

Faiza Nasir

Lecturer, Directorate of Education, Delhi

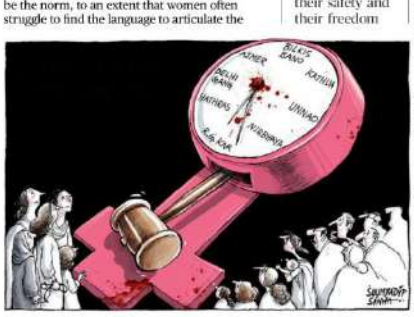
The brutal rape and murder of a woman doctor in Kolkata has led to the country finding itself, once again, engaged in a deep conversation on the safety of women in India. Women across the country face a spectrum of aggressive behaviours and violence – from sexual harassment and dowry-related deaths to rape and domestic violence. While the physical impact of violence against women is acknowledged by both the state and society as visible and tell-tale signs on women, there is considerably less focus on its psychological and behavioural consequences. This oversight means that while the physical and explicit acts of violence may provoke immediate and visible responses and draw public attention, the enduring psychological impact remains difficult to measure and often goes unnoticed and unaddressed.

An ingrained state of alertness

In the absence of adequate structural protection by the state and the society, the onus of one's safety often falls on women themselves. As a result, women in India are forced to live in a state of perpetual vigilance, constantly evaluating their surroundings for potential threats in public and private spaces. This state of constant alertness, deeply ingrained in the psyche of women, learnt and imbibed from a young age, then becomes both necessary and exhausting.

What makes this situation even more troubling is that this vigilant state has become so deeply embedded in daily life that it is often perceived to be the norm, to an extent that women often struggle to find the language to articulate the discomfort and mental labour it entails. Women become accustomed to living in this heightened state of awareness, and the psychological strain it creates often goes unrecognised – by themselves and by society.

Women should not have to choose between their safety and their freedom



This unspoken burden profoundly shapes how women interact with the world, perceive themselves, and engage with society. This constant need to assess and anticipate potential threats curtails her freedom to explore new places, to take risks, and to connect with others. This strips women of simple pleasures such as leisurely observation, spatial connection, and the ability to dwell in the moment. It even impacts career choices to personal relationships. Many women, for instance, decline job opportunities that require late-night travel or hesitate to move to new places without ensuring a strong support system. The simple pleasure of a leisurely walk in the park is overshadowed by a constant awareness of potential threats. These decisions, though grounded in rational concerns for safety, can significantly restrict their personal, material and psychological growth.

There are also intergenerational effects as this burden is often passed on from mother to daughter, who is taught to be cautious and adjust her behaviour to stay safe. This reinforces the idea that individual women are responsible for their own safety, rather than society taking collective action to create safer environments. As a result, women are expected to adapt their behaviour. These protective measures, thereby imposed by families and communities, which restrict a woman's mobility and freedom, also become violence. The vigilance also creates a dissonance between how women live and how they wish to live. As a woman and a teacher, I find myself grappling with this conflict daily. I encourage my young female students to be brave, to challenge patriarchal limitations, and to live freely. Yet, I find myself waiting for a male family member or friend to accompany me on a late-night trip, for example, a choice that feels at odds with the empowerment I advocate. Women are frequently forced to navigate this duality: advocating for empowerment while simultaneously adapting their behaviours to mitigate risks associated with their safety.

It is worse for the disadvantaged

Caste, class, and religion add complexity to the burden of vigilance women must bear, with marginalised women facing intensified discrimination and prejudice. For them, threats are not only gendered but also rooted in societal hierarchies. While women from privileged caste and class backgrounds may have access to relatively safer environments, such as gated communities and private transportation, they are still not immune to harassment and violence. However, women from disadvantaged groups face more immediate and pervasive dangers, often lacking institutional support to address safety concerns. These women, therefore, have no choice but to navigate environments where exploitation and abuse are constant threats, highlighting vulnerabilities often overlooked by society and the state.

Impact on society

When women are forced to prioritise safety over curiosity, and vigilance over exploration, they are denied the full spectrum of the human experience. The world, instead of being a place of wonder and discovery, becomes one of danger and caution. This not only limits their experiences but also deprives society of the contributions and innovations that could flourish if women were free from this constant burden.

The unseen and unspoken burdens that women carry; the emotional strain, psychological fatigue, and the loss of joy and freedom are as significant as any physical injury. Recognising and addressing this burden therefore is essential for building a more equitable society where women are not only safe but also free to live without the constant shadow of fear. However, to challenge this requires a fundamental shift in how we think about safety and violence. In a society that often equates violence against women solely with visible, physical harm, it is crucial to broaden our understanding to include the less tangible, yet equally damaging, forms of violence.

Women should not have to choose between their safety and their freedom. State and societal measures should not restrict women's freedom any further under the guise of ensuring safety. The challenge is not merely about liberating women from the constraints of fear and vigilance. It is about unlocking the full potential of half our society. To achieve this, we must acknowledge that the burden of perpetual vigilance imposed on women is not a natural or acceptable state but a form of violence in itself. This shift in perspective will allow everyone to live, thrive, and contribute equally, free from the constraints of safety concerns.

Crime, health-worker safety and a self-examination

Dr. Soham D. Bhaduri

a public health specialist and an independent researcher

The year 2017 saw heated protests by resident doctors in Maharashtra, following a series of vicious attacks on medical personnel in rather quick succession – as is invariably the case with sensationalised criminal offences. Despite the magnitude of the problem, the solution was straightforward and run-of-the-mill. It meant bolstering security in public hospitals and strengthening legal instruments to bring the malefactors to rapid justice. Similar incidents came and went, with much happening during the COVID-19 pandemic. The knee jerk responses too continued. One is hard-pressed to recall any conspicuous precedents of swift justice.

There lies a deeper problem

It is the case of the grisly death of a promising resident doctor in Kolkata that has taken the country by storm and that has spurred the Supreme Court of India to take *suo moto* cognisance of the happening. However, emerging answers to the issue continue to remain reflexive and simplistic, and possibly reflect an incomplete understanding of the malady beneath. In its proceedings on August 20, the Court decreed the constitution of a national task force to work out measures to strengthen hospital safety. Improved infrastructure and closed-circuit television surveillance, a greater security presence at hospitals, and safe night transport are reportedly some areas that will receive attention.

In the same vein, the West Bengal government has announced the '*Rattierer Saathi* (night companion)' programme aimed at improving the safety of women working in night shifts, particularly in medical colleges and hospitals. While such initiatives are critical, they implicitly conflate this issue with archetypal health worker violence, which is initiated by disgruntled patients due to perceived poor health-care services, or women's safety at large. What lurks underneath is the much more insidious problem of corruption of criminal proportions.

Conventional answers to health worker violence, such as improving hospital security and newer legislation, have miserably failed in tackling the problem over the years. These include reasons such as underfunding which are no different than why our health systems continue to remain frail in general. But the extent to which corruption contributes to the overall loss of lives has been vastly under-appreciated. If emerging accounts are anything to go by, there is a strong likelihood of deep-rooted, organised corruption having contributed to the gruesome crime in question, not to mention other incidents and the steady erosion of public health services that may have hitherto gone unheeded. The fact that this concerns an apex health-care institution in an already underfunded state public health system is acutely disconcerting.

Emerging answers to the issue of health-worker safety continue to remain reflexive and simplistic, and could show an incomplete understanding of the malady beneath

WHO estimates

The World Health Organization estimates that corruption claims nearly $455 billion annually worldwide, more than what it would cost to extend universal health coverage to all. In a good part of the developing world, corruption rather than a lack of funds is what majorly contributes to health-care crises and poor health outcomes. While often sensationalised, the discourse on medical corruption in India has largely concentrated on private losses and malfeasances, while its criminal dimensions have been largely underappreciated. Human resource-intensive health-care systems provide rapid breeding grounds for expansionary corruption, including the worst forms of sextortion, particularly in political systems where underfunding and poor oversight run rife.

In such circumstances, it is hard to conceive how much help would realistically accrue from merely improving the state of health workers' security and hospital infrastructure, even if they are somehow adequately implemented. Being painfully galvanised to the fact that medical corruption can claim the lives of health-care workers in addition to that of patients serves to indicate that the public health system and its drivers may be up for a rigorous self-examination.

Speedy delivery of justice in the Kolkata case is inarguably paramount, for nothing else said or done can ever serve as a consequential deterrent. Needless to say that we have traditionally fallen short in this respect, and the ramifications are for all to see.

The steps that are needed

But the national task force has a job that is arguably more monumental than simply recommending safety measures – which is to devise a potent road map to prevent and arrest medical corruption, particularly in the public sector. Certainly, this cannot be approached solely by a team of medical doctors. It requires expert inputs from public health, medico-legal, and other allied competencies, besides meriting the participation and the sanction of the larger governing and administrative community. And, the strategies so devised have to look much beyond instituting yet another novel legislative tool.

Apart from reforms centering on administrative transparency, accountability, and oversight, effective whistle-blower reporting and protection mechanisms and thorough digitalisation of public management systems are crucial. The need for ombudsmanship and other instruments to minimise political intrusion and manoeuvring cannot be overstated. Inspiration may be drawn from how fellow nations such as Brazil continue to battle political corruption in medicine.

Much also remains to be done in the way of modernising the typical 'control and command' Indian public hospital, which remains steeped in anachronistic ways. While efficiency reasons for such a modernisation abound, their pressing moral and regulatory bases have glaringly presented today and can no longer be overlooked.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hema report, ICC's role

With the publication of the Justice K. Hema Committee report, the putrid state of the Malayalam film industry has come to the fore. The onus is on the State government not to fail to see the wood in its entirety. The Internal Complaints Committee, despite its weaknesses, would still be a bulwark to stall atrocities against women. What is needed is to calibrate this to a foolproof level.

Ayyasseri Raveendranath,
Aranmula, Kerala

The issue of 'favours' solicited from women in return for roles in films was an open secret. But then, society in Kerala was not willing to accept it. The report should lead to structural changes where 'gang' assent should be replaced by selection on the basis of talent and abilities alone.

Cijo Joseph,
Kozha, Kottayam, Kerala

The report's push for transparency and accountability could disrupt power dynamics, potentially facing resistance from those benefiting from the status quo. Although it emphasises the need for stronger legal frameworks and survivor support systems, the real challenge lies in fostering a cultural shift toward respect and equality. Without sustained pressure from within and outside the industry, these reforms may remain on paper.

Narayanan Kizhumundayur,
Thrissur, Kerala

I am a person in his nineties and one who spends his waking hours reading, writing, listening to music and watching Malayalam movies. Unfortunately, the revelations of the report have damaged the level of my enjoyment of these films. In a particular scene in a film, a young actor embraces an old man with much emotion on hearing the news about the passing of a girl character. After going though details in the report, I felt ill as the report has also hinted at how the young actor, in real life, had tried to harm the older actor's career. I, like others, wish to see Malayalam movies as beautiful flowers on a boxwood shrub.

V. Babusenan,
Thiruvananthapuram

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

STEPS IN A JOURNEY

In aftermath of release of Hema Committee report are heartening signs of change. But the road to justice is long and arduous

A LONG SILENCE was broken last week with the release of the Justice Hema Committee report, and a swelling chorus of women speaking up has filled its place. In rapid succession, women from the Malayalam film industry began speaking publicly about the toxic, misogynistic work environment they've had to navigate, even as idols — including powerful, politically-connected actors — started to crumble. Two prominent figures, director Ranjith and actor Siddique have resigned their positions — as chairman of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy and general secretary of the Association of Malayalam Movie Artistes, respectively — following allegations of sexual misconduct. Meanwhile, the state government has announced the formation of a seven-member team of high-ranking police officers — four of whom will be women — to look into the revelations in the report. These are welcome developments, signalling that the tendency to dismiss the complaints of women as "he said, she said" is beginning to shift, and that a culture of accountability, even if only tentatively, is forming.

The road to this moment has been long and arduous, going further back than the 2017 abduction-and-sexual assault case that rocked the Malayalam film industry and led to the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective, which prevailed on the Kerala government to set up the committee headed by Justice K Hema. It goes all the way back to the December 2012 gangrape case in Delhi which shook the nation and brought protesters out on the streets. The burden of shame and silence that had long been inflicted on the victims was sought to be lifted, a process that gained momentum during the 2018 MeToo movement that saw several women speak up about sexual harassment at the workplace. There have been several bumps along the way, particularly when those accused of sexual misconduct wield considerable clout. Consider, for example, how long it took for the police to act in the case of former Wrestling Federation chief and ex-BJP MP, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, accused of sexual assault by women wrestlers. The nearly five-year delay in the release of the Hema Committee report is another example, which shows the persistence that such a fight demands.

The road ahead, passing through a landscape rutted with deep power asymmetries, won't be easy either. Demands for new laws and stricter punishments have been made, not only in the context of the Malayalam film industry but vis a vis crimes in Kolkata and Badlapur, for instance. These alone, however, cannot be the signposts to a future of greater accountability and justice. That, as actor Urvashi pointed out recently, will require changing existing structures and ensuring that the most vulnerable are heard. There is a need to ensure that the law can keep up with how sexual assault and harassment are now understood, but it cannot take place without chipping away at systems that enable and exculpate abusers. The onus for this, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi pointed out recently, is on both society and government, because "governments will come and go, but protecting lives and safeguarding the dignity of women" is everyone's responsibility.

We can hear the apathy

Facts about women's abuse in Malayalam film industry are out. Does anyone really care?

PADMAPRIYA JANAKIRAMAN

"The most dangerous thing in the world is apathy. We think of weapons, violence, warfare, disease as terrible dangers, and indeed they are, but we can take measures to avoid them. But once our apathy takes hold of us, then it is a disaster which has no recourse."

— His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje

THE HEMA COMMITTEE (HC) report commissioned by the Chief Minister of Kerala to examine issues at the workplace faced by women in the Malayalam film industry came out amid massive media and public furore on August 19. The committee was set up at the behest of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), a first-of-its-kind movement that works towards creating equal spaces and equal opportunities for women in the film industry. It took seven years, four months and two days of the WCC members' activism — and being cast out in varied ways — for this report to come out. We congratulated each other, but immediately came a gnawing sense of what would follow. I am not referring to the incessant follow-ups from various quarters on what we at the WCC are going to do next, but a familiar noise, conveying apathy, that has followed.

This familiar noise is of sensationalism, rather than engagement with the gravity of the issue. Sexual harassment overshadowing structural and social inequities has become the key narrative. The committee's findings are damning not just because of the serious sexual-harassment crimes it notes, but also the constitutional, labour and human-rights violations. The committee identified at least 17 forms of exploitation experienced by women working in 30 different categories within the industry. Some of these violations have been recorded as taking place across genders, although women are the most vulnerable.

> At a time when the burden of any reform for pushing gender inclusion and safety in cinema rests on the shoulders of the state government, the question is this: Will it remain apathetic or stand up and do what is right? Will it move beyond brand-building exercises, spending precious public money in organising mega conclaves for a public show of concern for the HC report? Or, will it demonstrate the political will to do what is needed?

This familiar noise is of taking the issue back to the women in order to find a resolution. How insensitive is it to ask women to file cases and relive the demons they fought in order to share their truth in front of a committee? All this, while knowing well that legal recourse will amount to nothing as there wouldn't be sufficient evidence to stand the test of judicial enquiry. This is apart from the harrowing mental agony and time that this process would take.

This familiar noise is of pitting one woman's account and experience against another so that divergent experiences in an unorganised industry like cinema are invalidated. "She said this does not happen" is placed against "she said all is ok" until this she-said tussle becomes the mainstream conversation and sidelines the issue that really needs to be addressed.

This familiar noise is of universalising an issue instead of feeling responsible to find solutions. A film association member remarked, "Don't these issues exist in other industries, why only blame us?" Apart from the morally corrupt nature of this statement, it is appalling that a peculiarly-structured unorganised sector like cinema, with 70-plus trade occupations engaged with no accountability loop, should be compared to any other industry.

The familiar noise is also of the bystander — the sense of apathy here is shaped by the assumption that someone else is better positioned to handle the situation and hence, they themselves need not have any sense of accountability and agency. Bystanders, please note, the problem of apathy is broken when you speak up.

The familiar noise is also of those feigning ignorance by stating that they haven't read the report. This is especially shocking coming from government officials who have been sitting on the report for the past four years. To their credit, the Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan-led Left government did set new standards in conversations around gender inclusion by initiating some key measures, including setting up the Hema Commission. But thereafter, its actions have not lived up to its initial enthusiasm. A case in point is the years of silence and non-publication of the Hema Committee report, until a court order mandated its release in the public domain. When it comes to sexism, misogyny and violence against women, there is an underlying layer of human nature that is sinister — apathy. Media spotlight and legal recourse are important in spotlighting issues and bringing about grievance redressal. But I wonder what it will take for us to be able to care for them.

In 1991, Kerala became the first Indian state to be recognised as a completely literate state. A big reason for this accomplishment is seeded in the cultural revolution led by social reformers and the then Left government in 1957. Decades later, the state is at a similar juncture.

At a time when the burden of any reform for pushing gender inclusion and safety in cinema rests on the shoulders of the state government, the question is this: Will it remain apathetic or stand up and do what is right? Will it move beyond brand-building exercises, spending precious public money in organising mega conclaves for a public show of concern for the HC report? Or, will it demonstrate the political will to do what is needed? For, on this depends not only the future of the many women and men who aspire to tell stories that shape Kerala society. The Kerala government's actions will be indispensable for other state governments to chart a roadmap and create gender-inclusive spaces through their film policies.

The writer is a National Award-winning film actor, dancer and public policy researcher. She is a member of the Women in Cinema Collective